葉月 文
Aya Hazuki
Hello, Hello and Hello
～piece of mind～
電撃文庫

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Illustration ぶーた

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DESIGN:Yoshihiko Kamabe

同時に、彼女の手元からピンク色の栞が空を舞った。
光に濡れたそれは、桜の花びらのようにも見えた。

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Prologue: The Flower Colors Drawn Out

Prologue

引き出しにしまったハナノイロ

This is the story I (watashi) created, of that 'wish' (till now) he knew not of.
And also--
This is the story of 'hope' (henceforth) she knew not of that was given to me (boku), reaching out to a certain Spring.

I (watashi) was returning from school.
My destination was a certain little park, a shortcut leading home, but I was stopped in my tracks just outside of it.
Yes, I reached the little park, wanting to take the shortcut, only to stop there.
There was a really pretty person there sitting on a really dirty bench. I had never seen such a pretty person. She had a closed book on her knees, with a pink bookmark placed on the cover, instead of between the pages.
I guess the world, or God Himself even, might have been really familiar with her beauty.
The sunlight was so gentle, that it was hard to imagine there being a snowstorm mere days ago. It filled the world with its blessings, and the scenery was picturesque.
If possible, I want to keep looking, so I thought.
Driven by that impulse, I tugged hard at the straps of the large red backpack, and took a deep breath. Giving myself silent encouragement, I changed directions and cautiously approached the sitting beauty, like I was approaching a newly-discovered kitten. Finally, I sat next to her.
She glanced at me, but quickly looked into the distance again, scratching her head as she lifted it up towards the sky, bluer than yesterday.
Despite that, it'll be a while until Spring arrives, and the sakura trees by the side were still naked.
So what is with this sweet sakura fragrance floating around? I wondered.
I kept looking at her.
The outline of her straightened throat.
The silhouette of her slightly raised chin.
And the eyes reflecting the blue sky.
Now that I could admire her from up close, there was another level of sparkle to her beauty.
Her long hair was really fluffy, her eyebrows a little raised. Her face looked happy, satisfied, delighted, but...
She seemed a little sad.
I approached her probably because of that imperceptible sadness. Even though the scene appeared so perfect... No, it because of that apparent perfection that I noticed the flaw.
“Hey, hey, big sister."
I called out to her, and it startled her enough to jolt her shoulders. She turned her head towards me, pointed her finger at her pretty face, and widened her eyes. She looked really cute. Well, it was probably rude to

think of someone older than me as cute. Couldn’t help it when this was my first thought, though.
“'Big sister', as in me?"
“Uhm."
“Okay... What's the matter?"
Our chat started with the most unnecessary topic.
“Your long hair is really pretty."
She beamed gently.
“Is that so?"
“Isn't it troublesome to leave it that long?"
“Very. But I never thought of cutting it."
“Hmm... Why?"
“Because this is something I'm proud of. The passing of time, the thoughts I had, it was the best proof of me falling in love."
I think mama once said that before, that every year, the hair grows by 15cm.
Time couldn’t be seen, but here it was moving gently next to her in a tangible way. How long was her hair right now?
“Have you fallen in love before, sis?"
“Yep. The happiest love in this whole world."
I looked up at her, trying to digest the meaning of the words 'happiest love in this whole world'. What was that? Something really sweet?
It brought up a thought.
I fumbled around my pocket until my fingertips touched something hard.
Great. I still had two left.
“Want some chocolate, sis?"
I took out a bite-sized chocolate from my pocket and handed it to her. I wanted to have it as a snack later but it wasn’t like I couldn’t give it to her. Because today...
“Eh?"
“You don't like chocolates?"
“I do. Really. But why give it to me?"
“I feel energized when I get sweets. Don’t you, big sister?"
“No. I do too."
“Then, please have some."
I ate one of the two chocolates and left the other next to her. Though a little hesitant, she finally took it.
“Thank you."
I saw her put the little chocolate between her red lips, and told her, “I heard that it's Valentine's Day today, a day for friends. It's a day to give chocolate to important people."
Saying that made me feel a bit embarrassed, and I hurriedly looked away.
My eyes ended up looking at the park’s playground. There was a swing and a slide. Nobody was around, and it felt lonely, like the whole world had

forgotten about this place. I figured that being able to see the big sister in a corner of my vision was a comfort of sorts.
But she rolled the chocolate in her mouth, and wasn't able to speak.
I was the only one talking.
“I wanted to give chocolate to Tai-chan and Kai-kun. Have you given any to anyone, big sister?"
She nodded gently.
“Well, everyone's happy. I'll be really happy if you cheer up too, big sister."
“…But I am?"
“Actually, it looks like you're crying."

Hearing those words, she touched her cheeks with her hand as if checking something.
Her fingertips found no dampness.
“Fufu. Sounds like something someone once said to me. What a bother. What a bother."
Her feet rocked back and forth, like a swing.
There seemed to be more sadness in her expression now. However, her face looked much happier than before. I wondered why that was?
“The promise reached him, and his echoing voice is still catching me in turn, not letting go."

——Those words sounded like a curse (blessing).

Once she said that, a light gust of wind blew through the trees, shaking the branches. It was a little cold still as it was barely past Winter time. The golden light of Spring glittered in the corner of my eyes.
In that moment, the pink bookmark escaped her hands and flew into the sky.
It disappeared in the light, looking like a sakura petal.
““Ah.""
We exclaimed in unison, standing up, reaching with our hands after it. However, it ended up just evading her palm, and gently landing in mine. It was an ordinary piece of paper, blank on both sides. However, I could tell that she really treasured it and had held onto it for a really long time. Her characteristic sakura fragrance had completely soaked into the surface.
“Here, big sister."
She stared at it, and shook her head.
“Keep it. As thanks for the chocolate."
“But without this, you won't know where you stopped reading at."
“Ah... See, it's not really a bookmark..." her words trailed off, and she started muttering to herself.

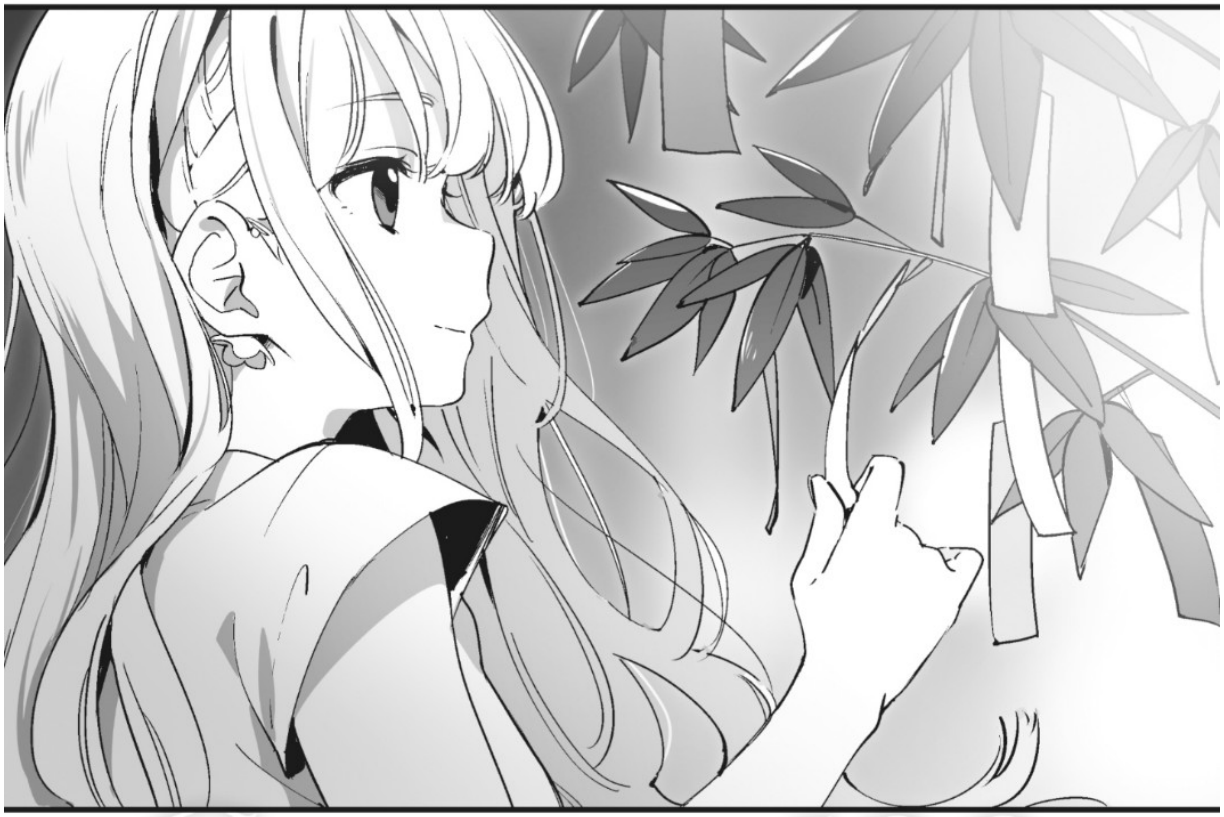
“I guess... That moment really happened. It's not a lie, is it?" I think I heard her say.
Soon after, she told me what it really was. She kept it with the book, so I thought it was a bookmark, but now that she explained, it really was more like 'that'. Even though there was nothing woven through it leaving just a hole at the top.
It was something used to make wishes to the stars.
“Can I?"
“Yep. My wish has been fulfilled."
“What did you wish for, big sister?"
“I, no, the two of us... We shouted the same wish at the last moment, towards each other. Like Vega and Altair in the sea of dazzling stars. 'Come see me', 'call my name', things like that. That is, —"
She paused, took a deep breath, and lifted her head.
Then, she smiled very happily.
“The proof of great love."
Somehow, the sadness disappeared from her face. Did the sweetness of the chocolate melt away her sadness? Did she recall something happy, so happy that it surpasses the sadness and despair? I would never know.
There's one thing I do know, though.
I have never met a person with such a pretty smile again in my entire life.
I nearly burst into tears, starting to panic. My nose felt itchy, the world's starting to twist around. I wasn't sad, nor in despair. It's not painful.
It was like... like she just brought all the happiness in the world into her hands when she smiled, filling my heart, causing it to be oh so warm.
“So if you make a wish in the future, and find something you really want, you can try writing on it. It'll definitely reach the sparkling stars, just like mine did."
If that was the case, could I smile as happily as she just had?

I was in the midst of doing my own homework, and opened the drawer, wanting to get my eraser. There's a photo of me together with my friends, the test script when I got my first full marks, the great luck charm I drew at the shrine, the glass ball in the ramune, and various other memories inside the desk.
However, what attracted my attention was a faint sakura fragrance coming from a pink slip of paper.
It resembled a bookmark, but actually, it was used to write wishes.
It was something I picked up at a nearby park a long time ago. Right now, I was completely different from that girl back then, I did have a wish I wanted to fulfill no matter what. I thought about it now. I was lost. In the end, I never got down to chasing after that wish.
So this pink fragment of spring, which had been delivered to me by the cold breeze of dying winter, had remained completely blank inside my drawer.

And so it would remain, until the time I would encounter the day when I would be able to write that wish down.

Contact 130 - The Stars Clutter, The Wishes Weaved

星を繋いで、願いを紡いで



Contact.130

“Eh, it’s Yoshi-kun. Hello~”
It happened 30 minutes before we were supposed to meet.
I stopped at the Southern exit of the shopping arcade. There was a small antiquarian bookshop opened to the public, and Yoshi-kun was beyond it.
It seemed he never noticed my voice and my highly raised hand.
After some thought, I went a different way. To him, of course.
He could not hear my footsteps, and I crept up to him.
Dust refracted the light shining through the door and windows of the dim shop, glittering as they danced in the air. He, focused on the book in such an environment, was mesmerizing.
A day’s worth of lessons was over, but the white shirt on him remained. His back was so straight, one might wonder if there was a stick in his back. The long bangs might be causing him difficulty in reading, so he did move them aside from time to time. His eyebrows are pretty long for a boy, the gentle eyes beneath them were following the words.
I went to the entrance, and pulled a book from a cart full of them.
The cover was completely tattered, and there was a long crack down the spine. I could see a faint ‘¥100’ on the back, in pencil. It was cheaper than a drink can.
This book was written by a certain famous author—so famous that those who hardly read would know of his name, and the textbooks had records of him. This might be his most renowned work.
The pages were parched by the sun, and I enjoyed the distinct crispness they had, but I never paid attention to the words and the story. The entire time, I was staring at the boy bigger than me, and a year younger.
Did he sense my stare? Or was it just coincidence?
Yoshi-kun lifted his eyes from the book, as though he had thought of something, only to finally see me. He was surprised, and beamed.
I too beamed.
“Is this book interesting?”
“Sorta.”
“But you seem rather engrossed there?”
We never talked, and merely twitched our eyebrows, mouth and eyes to express our emotions and thoughts.
“You figured me out. Ehh, mind waiting a bit? I’m almost done here.”
“Ehh~shall I wait~?”
“Please do.”
“Just joking. Enjoy yourself.”
“Thanks. What are you reading?”
Yoshi-kun nodded towards me, and tilted his head sceptically. I raised the book to his height, showing him the cover, and saw his look of understanding in while his vision was halved.
“I see. That famous one. Give me five minutes.”
“Yes.”

Yoshi-kun immersed himself into the sea of the story, beginning to navigate once again.
This time, I quietly pursued the impatient words eager to convey their story, so as not to disturb him.
❆
I first met Haruyoshi Segawa-kun two days ago.
I approached him while he was heading home, asking him how to head to the station.
I already knew however, and he would unsuspectingly accept this flimsy approach.
“Thanks for helping me out. I’m staying at the hotel near there. Didn’t know how to go back after going out on a stroll.”
The gloomy skies were on the verge of crying, the tips of the two umbrellas scraped the asphalt, creaking away.
“A hotel? So you’re on a trip or something?”
“Hm, something like that.”
“There are places more appropriate for sightseeing though. Ah, not there. This side’s a little closer. Oh yes, erm…”
“I’m Yuki Shiina.”
“Segawa Haruyoshi.”
We introduced ourselves as we went down the paths, which I had walked countless times with. We talked our our names, ages, and even the blood types, which was unnecessary to begin with. One again, I heard for the first time, the things I had heard so many times.
“Now that you mention it, it is a pity. Guess a town with nothing much around is pretty boring, eh?”
“Hmm, you can’t be saying that about the town you live in though. I prefer to just walk around and see the plain, ordinary sights than the famous tourist attractions. Also, I like this town..”
This is true.
I really do like this town.
“Well, I can’t say that I don’t understand how you feel. Every time I find an unfamiliar alley, I end up walking in.”
“You really do, huh?”
“Yeah, even though I don’t know where I’ll be going.”
“It’s fun when you don’t know where you’ll end up at.”
“I do get what you mean. It’s not a feeling I want to know, not something I should, but I always end up lost, as you say.”
While we were chatting away, we found an alley. I tapped the entrance with my umbrella, and as I knew Yoshi-kun had stopped behind me, I turned around to smile.
His face was clearly going ‘whelps, here we go’. It was really funny.
That face of his definitely was not of disgust. I, and only I, knew that.
“Okie, let’s go.”
“Ohh~!”

We raised our fists enthusiastically, and entered the alley.
Day by day, we were moving to summer, and the temperature continued to rise with the number of days. There were uncommon flowers growing on the walls, and the leaves looked exceptionally green next to them.
“Shiina-san, if I may ask, where are you from?”
He asked as he pried aside the leaves reaching his eyes.
“Call me Yuki. No honorifics, of course.”
I was unable to answer this question, so I replied so to throw him off.
“Eh, but you’re older.”
“It’s fine, don’t worry. I’ll call you Yoshi-kun.”
“Not Haru?”
“Is that what others always call you?”
“Yep.”
“Well, I guess I should call you Yoshi-kun. It’s boring to be the same as everyone. Guess we decided?”
I smiled, and Yoshi-kun’s face was a little red, maybe because of the simmering heat. He spaced out silently.
“Yoshi-kun?”
I tilted my head to look up at his face, and he reeled flusteredly. For ome reason, he looked away again. Eh, what was with that response? I never saw that before.
“Eh? Ah, yeah. Got it. Please take care of me, Yuki.”
“Hm? Okay, please take care of me, Yoshi-kun.”
It happened on June 29th, Wednesday.
We began the 130th meeting on the day, the day where the plum rain was about to arrive.
❆
Once I was done reading a short story within that old book, Yoshi-kun left the shop. The bag slinging from his shoulder was swaying by his waist. He was holding a brown bag as big as a book.
“Kept you waiting.”
“Can’t resist after all, huh?”
“Sorta. But I don’t like it when I can’t finish the exciting parts.”
He raised the paper bag as he said so, and I noticed something else in his hand. It was a rectangular pale blue paper. A bookmark? It would be boring if it was.
“Say, Yoshi-kun. What is that?”
“Which one?”
“The pale blue.”
“Huh, this? A gift I guess. Well…it’s July soon, right?”
“Yes?”
“And on July 7th…”
“Tanabata.”
It was the day where two lovers, separated by the Milky Way, could finally meet.

In other words, that paper is—
“Yeah, I guess the committee came up with this to liven up the shopping street this year. All the shops give this strip to the shoppers. There’s an open space down this road, and the bamboos will be there. The lights will be lit on Tanabata.”
That imagery was conjured in my mind. The bamboo leaves swaying with the leaves, the dazzling lights shining upon countless wishes.
Being a little agitated, I said,
“That’s great.”
“Eh? Really?”
“Yeah. It really is. Can I join in too?”
“I guess so? As I said, you get one strip if you shop here.”
“I see. Wait a sec please. I’ll buy a book too.”
This time, Yoshi-kun’s waiting outside, and I entered the antiquarian bookshop.
The shop’s darker and smaller than I imagined.
There was a cashier deep inside the shop, and an uncle was seated on a bench, reading intently. He was wearing a loose shirt and pants, and clearly did not look like anyone belonging to the service sector. Was he the boss?
He merely glanced aside at me, and returned to the world of the book in his hands. I merely nodded to him, and trotted to the aisles between the bookshelves
Renown and obscure works were lined together. The book spines were door handles leading to another world.
Which, one, shall, I choose, then.
Seeking out stories is an interesting experience. To be honest, I really wanted to spend lots of time choosing one, but Yoshi-kun’s waiting for me, so I have to choose quickly. Dazai? Akutagawa? Or maybe I should try out Yukio Mishima since I never read his works. There’s his Temple of the Golden Pavilion and so on.
Erm…Mishima, Mishima and …
I slid my finger by the names of the author on the spines, according to Gojuon, only to find a completely unrelated book between them.
The title was written in white, with a deep blue base.
Someone probably stuffed it here without returning it to the proper place.
I touched the hard spine of the book with my fingertip, and slowly pried it from the pile. Its cover, adorned with light blobs of various sizes, slowly showed itself from the spine. It was a graphic book depicting the constellation.
I knew nothing of the stars’ names, nor their shapes. Such knowledge’s commonly used as novel themes, and I wanted to learn about them one day, but I never got the chance. This might be it.
I pulled the book out from the row of them, and took it off the shelf. “Huu”, so I blew at the dust gathered on the cover, and gently dusted it. The smooth surface was nice to touch.

It’s a well made book. A little dirty, but pretty clean for a second-hand book.
I nonchalantly flipped through the pages, and found lots of colorful illustrations used in this book. It explained each and every seasonal constellation. I then checked for the page number indicating Tanabata, closed the book, and took it in my hands. I then said to the uncle.
“I’m buying this book.”
It was priced exactly at 500 yen.
I didn’t know if it was expensive or not.
I was given a pink slip.

Pata pata.
I sensed the pattering on the windows, and then lifted my head from the book I was reading.
I pried the curtain aside, and found that it was raining outside. The rain got heavier, the lights of the town dimmer in the rain, the familiar night scene gentler than before.
The moist street reflected blue and red lights, and depicted on the puddles were the sights of pedestrians moving on and the rain pelting from the sky. Replacing them were ripples expanding one after another. Such a sight left be bemused.
I closed the constellation book I bought the same day, and opened the window a little. Once I did, the moist cold air immediately swept into the humid room.
There’s a fragrance spreading gently in the room. Do I call it the smell of rain? Or perhaps it was the smell of the sky.
The countless transparent rain droplets fell from the sky, and to me, they were the threads linking heaven and earth.
I gently reached my hand out of the window, and a raindrop landed on my fingertip, before splashing away. It never rested on my finger, and quickly slid further down..
I looked towards its source.
The sky typically wouldn’t lose to the lights of the town, but on this day, the skies were grey.
I could not see beyond the grey clouds, but I was imagining the imagery beyond the dark clouds.The constellations that were depicted in the book.

On the topic of the summer night sky, the most famous of the constellations are α Cygni, α Aquilae and α Lyrae, the vertices of the Summer Triangle. The bluish-white star of α Lyrae is Vega, and α Aquilae is Altair. The Milky Way flows right between them, and they can only meet once a year.
With my other hand, I patted the pink paper that was next to the book.
It was an ordinary piece of paper.

It was a little thin, regular, a uniformly colored bookmark. On the yearly Tanabata however, it seems wishes can be granted if one is to write a wish and hang it on the bamboo.
Such trivial things won't cause miracles however.
The world's occasionally kind, but it's typically cruel.
I knew that, very well indeed. But…
I had countless urges to write my wish, but I could never express them clearly. Right now, the paper's still blank.
Will it be all different if I can see the stars? If I can imagine them passing the Milky Way, will I gain some courage.
The rain continued to pour.
The clouds remained so thick.
And my eyes did not reflect the glow of the stars.

It's hot. So I thought as I couldn't help but close my eyes. Nowhere in particular, I was hot all over. I was burning from head to toe. When did such heat reside in my body to begin with?
I woke up due to the energy oozing from my body. I really didn't know what happened.
My back was all sweaty, the shirt clinging to the skin. It was uncomfortable, my nose was stuffed, and I had difficulty breathing. What's going on?
My joints were searing uncomfortably, and I grimaced. My eyelids were heavy, my body moreso. I couldn't get up like usual, and while I tried, I quickly fell back . The neat bedsheet was crumpled, and the bed let out a little creak.
"Haa…haa…" I wheezed heavily, thinking hard as I looked to the digital watch by the bedside. The green light informed me it was less than an hour till my meeting with Yoshi-kun.
It seemed I slept for at least 12 hours. If possible however, I wanted to continue sleeping. I really had no urge to move at all.
Despite that, I unwittingly reached my hand out.
Just as how I sought the light when I was young.
I had to go.
Yoshi-kun's waiting for me.
He probably would be waiting for me in the rain if I did not go. I felt heartache just imagining that scene.
And more importantly, I wanted to see his smile while calling my name.
"Nn, nnnn…nn!"
This time, I propped my body up with my hands.
I slowly wiped my sweat off with a cloth, and put on a winter jacket.
I looked in the mirror, and found a completely flushed me. The face was redder than apples and strawberries. The eyelids were heavy, and my eyes were half opened. That face did not look cute at all. I really didn't want to show Yoshi-kun that.

I withheld the urge to cry, combed my hair, put on my makeup, and of course, never forgot to apply the sakura perfume.
I was exceedingly late by the time I left the hotel, but I hurried over to Yoshi-kun. I passed the station, and entered the arcade of the shopping street opposite the hotel.
I kept moving with my legs and the umbrella. My legs felt light, and I felt I was about to fall. If there was a strong gust and I did not stand upright, I would have fallen over. How long left? How long more until I could meet Yoshi-kun?
Right at this moment.
"Yuki." I heard a voice. My name was called.
However, that voice did not seem as warm as before. It sounded more worried instead.
Ah, but it is still very warm.
"What are you doing!?"
He yelled as he hurried to me. I lost all strength at that moment, probably because I was relieved. I nearly fell over, and Yoshi-kun hugged me. It's hard. It hurts.
They were the hands of a boy.
It was the body of a boy.
"Well, we promised."
"Promised?"
For what? Yoshi-kun was definitely not suffering, but he looked like he’s about to cry.
“Yes. We promised. Just yesterday, didn’t we? We said we’ll meet the next day.”
“We did, but you can’t be showing up like this.”
“You’ll be worried if I don’t show up, no? You’ll just wait for me stupidly, right?”
“That’s…”
Not the case—but to stop him from saying these words, I placed my index finger on his lips.
“You lie. I knew that.”
Because you’re here now, right?
You came looking for me because you’re worried about me, right?
I knew that. I already knew how kind a person you were.
But at this point, I was suffering, unable to say anything. I could not voice out.
And my consciousness started fading away.
“Yuki? Yuki?”
The voice calling for me became distant.
Ahh, it’s fine. I’ll just have a nap. I’ll recover after some rest. But it’s because of a person like you that I—
And my consciousness snapped. At the last moment, nobody, not even I, knew what I was thinking, what I wanted to say

❆
A long time ago, I went to see the stars.
Where did I see them? When was it?
“Hey, Yuki. Can you see it?”

Papa said to me after he got out of the car.
Just dozens of minutes ago, he suddenly yelled for me to get into the car, and I was brought to this place without knowing my destination. I was probably feeling uneasy back then.
And a little pouty.
“Mhm□Can’t see anything.”

“You got to switch off the car lights, hubby.”

“Ah, right. Wait a sec. Righto, done. How about now?”

Papa switched off the lights, and the world immediately turned dark.
We were at a corner of the world, devoid of light and noise.
At that moment, my eyes could not capture that miniscule speckle of light.
“I still can’t see.”

“Seems like your eyes have to get used to it. Okay, how about this?”
“Kya!!”
Papa covered my eyes with his hands. They were large and powerful, reliable and warmer than anything in this world. Before I knew it, I had calmed down. I heard the wind blowing, the green grass swaying away. It was extremely relieving, and I really had the urge to take a deep breath.
“Ne, nee, Sis, Papa, what are you doing? Hide and seek?”
“Yeah. You want to play too, Umi?”
“Yes!”
“Play with Mama, Umi. Come here.”
“Oh.”
I heard my sister’s innocent voice, along with Mama’s kind words. Those voices were neither too overbearing nor too soft to be heard, and they blended perfectly with the breeze.
“Hey Papa. Are you done yet?”
“What do you mean, done? I just covered your eyes, Yuki. You’re impatient. Who do you take after?”
“Well, it’s definitely not me.”
“So that makes it, me?”
“Finally have some self-awareness?”
Mama’s giggle was as carefree as my friends—
“Are we done~?”
Papa and Mama burst out laughing at Umi, who never understood what was going on. They answered in unison.

““Not yet~””
“Oh.”
“Looks like Umi is as impatient as I am.”
“Great. Everything I love is linked to the future.”
“What about the things I love?”
“Well, you have passed them down to these two, no?”
“For example?”
“Beauty.”
“Fhm. This is true.”
“Say, hubby.”
Mama pretended to sigh,
“What is it?”
“You should be a little embarrassed when saying that.”
“Even though it's a fact?”
“That’s all the more reason.”
And the two girls who had been silent all this while let out a unified sigh, breaking the mood.
““Are we done??““
I didn’t know what Umi was thinking, but I cried out as I really had enough of their conversation.
All this while, I felt itchy on the side of my head, along with my throat.
So the two adults replied to our immature voices with definite answers.
““It’s done~““
Papa suddenly removed his hands, and my eyes regained light. The next moment, I saw a sea of light in my eyes. Why? Why? That space was complete darkness just now.
I looked to my side, and found Umi seated on mama’s lap, grinning away.
“Umi? Have you found them?”
“Un~”
“Tell me what you found then.”
“I found the stars!”
As Umi had said, right before our eyes were tens of thousands of glittered. Shown in our eyes were thousands of stars glittering away. I felt that I could touch the stars as long as I reached my hand out. I tried tiptoeing, reaching my hand out, but of course, I could not touch it. For some reason however, I sensed the light of the stars gathered upon my fingertips.
Papa stood next to me, pointing at the sky.
“It’s not often we get to see a starry night in spring. Let’s look for the Big Dipper. Do you know what that is, Yuki?”
“Just the name.”
That name did appear in a book I read.
“Hm, I see.”
Papa knelt down, bringing his eyes to my level.
“Think of the stars in the north as a scoop. That’s the Big Dipper.”
“Where?”

“There are four brighter stars there, right? Start linking from the one at the bottom right.”
I did as he said, and began to connect the lights.
And on the pure black canvas in my eyes, the yellow lines of lines slowly formed the shape of the constellation.
“Link that, and that, and that, right?”
I drew the lines with my finger.
“Yes. Now, draw a bigger arch with a scoop. There’s an orange light on the line, right? That’s Arcturus, Guardian of the Bears. It’s the alpha star of Boötes. Next is the white Spica, in a corner of Virgo. Link them all, and you get the Spring Triangle.”
After that, papa told me the names of many stars, like Spica and Arcturus and Denebola forming the Spring Triangle, and a larger spring Great Diamond with the Cor Caroli.
Actually, I was beginning to lose track of which star was which, but Papa was explaining so enthusiastically, and I decided to listen quietly. Even without knowing about them, I liked looking at these sparkling things. I’m a girl after all.
“Which star do you like, Yuki?”
Papa asked, and I had a little thought. The little stars were cute, and the large ones were pretty. They were all of various colors, some white, some yellow. I lifted my head towards the sky, and said the name of the first star I found.
The orange light was dazzling there.
“Arcturus. I like it..”
The moment I said this name, I felt the nameless cavity being filled up completely. I see, moments of liking something can happen at such ordinary moments too.
“I see.”
Papa patted my head. That careless way he does it always messes my hair, so I didn’t really like him touching my head. It didn’t feel so bad this time however.
“Then let’s learn a little more about Arcturus before we go home. It means Guardian of the Bears, and in Hawaii, they call it Hōkūle’a.”
“Hōkūleʻa.”
I repeated papa’s words, wanting to engrave it in my memories.
“Yes. It means ‘the Star of Gladness’. If there’s anything to be happy about, look up at the sky and find this star. Your joy will definitely reach it.”
❆
I opened my eyes, and the orange light I had seen in the sky a long time ago entered my eyes.
I unwittingly muttered the name of that star, and the boy seated by the bedside tilted his head. It’s Yoshi-kun. Looking at it carefully, I found that it was not the starry sky, but the familiar ceiling of the hotel. That light’s a lot darker than a real star, bigger, and closer.

“Eh? Why are you here, Yoshi-kun?”
Papa was not here; neither was Mama, nor Umi.
Such was the reality I was in.
“You don’t remember? You had a fever, and you forced yourself to go. You collapsed there.”
Speaking of which, that seemed to be the case.
I had some memories, but my mind was preoccupied with something else entirely. Those things were still by my side just moments ago, like my family’s laughter, the glitter of the stars, Papa’s reliable arms, and Mama’s flowing long hair. These memories continued to grip my heart, never fading away.
“Looks like you forgot.”
“You brought me here, Yoshi-kun?”
“Eh? Ah, yeah. I kinda explained to the hotel staff. Really took a lot of effort. And well, just to add, it’s the hotel staff who changed you, not me.”
I didn’t know when I had changed into a different set of clothes. My undergarments were different, and I felt a lot more refreshed.
“Hm hm, I see, I see. You’re embarrassed.”
I wanted to get up, but Yoshi-kun stopped me. I felt his hand on my hand being colder than usual, probably because of my fever.
I turned to the side, and found there was the constellation book I had bought days ago
I guess I had this dream because of the book. Its cover’s smooth and cold, comfy to touch.
I pulled the blanket to my mouth, and whispered with a hot breath.
“Erm, I had a dream. When I was young, I saw the stars with my family.”
“Stars?”
“Yes. It’s probably…back in spring. Papa taught me many things, but yes, I was young, I didn’t know them very well. He taught me so much, but I never got to memorize them.”
If only I had paid more attention to what he said, only at this point did I think so.
I heard Papa and Mama say many things, and talked about lots of things with them. Their cheesy conversations were a little embarrassing, but I wouldn’t say I disliked them
“Are you done?”
“Why say this now?”
“That’s what my little sister and I said back then. We were looking for the stars, and we were saying things like ‘Are we done yet’, ‘Not yet’, ‘Are we done yet’, ‘Not yet’. And after that, we saw the stars cluttering the skies. They’re pretty, they really were…”
For some reason, a tear fell. My voice was shaking. My chest was in pain. It was really, really painful.
I recovered to find myself reaching towards the ceiling. It was an orange light, not that of the stars, but artificial. Arcturus, Hōkūleʻa, the star of

gladness. No, that’s not it, I had nothing in my hands. Everything was long gone from me, those days, the past, my family’s voices, the warmth.
But—
My empty hands were filled by something else.
It was soft, a little crude, wide, and warm.
It’s Yoshi-kun’s hand.
I sniveled.
Yoshi-kun wiped away my tears with his other hand. He’s unexpectedly clumsy at doing such things, a little like Papa in this sense. With a hoarse voice, I told him.
“I really want to see the stars.”
“Eh?”
“Take me there.”
“…Sure, I got a good hiding place. Few of the locals know that place. I’ll take you there once you’re feeling better..”
“Hey, Yoshi-kun..”
I wonder if he realized that my voice had contained thousands of words worth of gratitude.

—Thank you, for being by my side.

And once again, I closed my eyes.
The boy’s smile was ingrained deep within my eyes.
I felt the sadness and loneliness in my heart become a little milder, and before I knew it, my erratic breathing had become calm.

I spent the rainy day in my sleep, and when the sun set down from the sky, my fever had subsided completely, as though everything before never happened.
There was still some time for us. I heaved a sigh of relief.
If it had been a day later, I would be unable to see the stars with Yoshi-kun.
Once the sun had completely set, we gathered at the station near Yoshi-kun’s house. It seemed the ‘good place’ was on a hilltop.
He emphasized that I should be careful of bugs, so I covered my skin almost completely, not exposing anything. But he said I should wear something comfortable to move it. Well, I guess he’ll be flustered seeing some of my flesh. He’s unexpectedly a silent pervert.
I took a rental bicycle from the station, and from the corner of my eye, I glanced at the farms while riding down the alleys.
The breeze blew into my face, and the scenery clattered back. I pedaled on, moving faster than usual.
There were street lights at intervals of 10 meters or so, forming little yellow blobs in the space called night. My eyes slowly got used to the night, recapturing the various silhouettes dyed black by the darkness.

The vegetable leaves on the green farms were swaying leisurely in the wind, it seemed. Some noisy frogs were croaking together, their cries echoing from various distances.
The bicycle continued to clatter, and there was a little round beam of white light shining before me, along with the silhouette of a tall boy.
“Yoshi-kun—”
I called his name.
I felt a tingling in my heart. I was happy, probably due to the sweet mood during this night.
“What is it—?”
“How much longer—?”
“About 10 minutes on bike—”
“I see—”
We yelled at a volume no softer than the frogs’ croaking. Farms were the only things down the sides of this road, and there was no obstacle blocking our voices. They spread across this open space, mixing and merging into the darkness of the night.
“Feels good—”
“Eh? What? Can’t hear you clearly—.”
“I say the wind at night feels good!!.”
I yelled with a louder voice than before.
We parked the bicycle by the foot of the hill, and scaled the linear slope for about 5 minutes or so. There appeared a space large enough for an adult male to duck through, and Yoshi-kun went through it without hesitation. He sprayed some insect repellent on me, and I kept coughing. I didn’t like this smell.
The further we went in, the darker it got. We ended up holding hands, though I didn’t know who started it. Whose hand was the moist one?
I should know about myself very well, but at this point, my mind was a complete blank, and I couldn’t tell at all.
We pried aside the shrubs, walking on for another ten minutes or so. We arrived at a wide and empty space, and I knew without being told, this was the destination.
The wind blew, and my hair fluttered in a mess. Despite that, we never let go of our hands.
“Yuki. Close your eyes.”
“Eh? Why?”
“Just do it.”
“But..,”
“It’s fine. I’ll bring you over.”
So I obeyed his gentle little request, and closed my eyes. He held my hand with some strength, and I was led to take a single step. At this point, I was really in the midst of darkness, devoid of light.
“You done?” It was a trembling voice.
Yoshi-kun giggled, and answered me a pre-planned reply..

“Not yet~”
“Are we done?”
“Not yet□”
This happened over and over again, many, many times. I took his voice as a marker while moving forward. We stepped upon the green grass, the rustling sound and the sensation of the grassy ground clearly reaching my ears and feet.
I had a feeling we walked for a very long time, but we probably walked for a dozen meters or so.
Soon,Yoshi-kun said,.
“We’re ready. Princess, please open your eyes.”
“What’s with that out of a sudden? Why Princess?”
I unwittingly imagined Yoshi-kun’s face being all red.
“Please don’t retort me here.”
Dammit Takuma, this isn’t what you said would happen. I could hear Yoshi-kun muttering. Seemed like his friend suggested.
“Anyway, I can open my eyes now, right?”
“Ah, yeah. Please do.”
So I slowly opened my eyes.
“Eh?” I sensed the murmurs getting swallowed up.
It was a place the sun could not reach. It was dark everywhere; up, down, left, right. In this darkness, there were yellow, white, orange, red and green lights sparkling brilliantly. There were clusters of stars seemingly filling the sky, and clusters of ground stars formed by many things.
Yoshi-kun and I were floating in space.
“There are stars blinking in the sky and all the ground.”
“Pretty, isn’t it? This is a treasured place of mine.”
“Yes, it really is pretty. Really pretty.”
I repeated the words over and over again, and began to run, causing Yoshi-kun, who was holding my hand, to nearly lose his balance, making a flustered sound.
“Ah, sorry. You alright?”
“I’m fine. I’m happy seeing you happy. Let’s go.”
This time, I walked alongside him towards the light.
The weather was perfect, and it was a cloudless, clear day. The bright moon shone in the night sky, so brilliant it swallowed the light of many stars. It was no match for the sun, but the queen of the night showed its sharp golden light, proudly dyeing the sky cyan. Yes, it wasn’t black. The brightness of the moon turned the black night a deep cyan.
Before we realized, the moon had shone a shadow at our feet, one combining the two of us into one.
“This is the second time in my life seeing such a pretty night sky.”
“Does it suit what you desire?”
“Of course.”
“Great.”

“It’s really, really pretty. Oh yeah. Let’s spot some constellation, Yoshi-kun.”
“You know about them, Yuki?”
“Not at all. What about you, Yoshi-kun?”
“Same here.”
“We’re the same then. I bought a constellation book some days ago. Let’s use that to look for them, shall we?”
“Sure. Let’s try.”
Yoshi-kun was sufficiently prepared for this, for he had red film stuck on the flashlight. It seemed this was to prevent excessive brightness. We stared at the compass and the picture book, and we were so close, our foreheads nearly touched. We weren’t embarrassed however, maybe because of the night atmosphere.
“Let’s look for the Summer Triangle First. We’ll connect the constellation from there.”
We looked at the sky in unison. My long hair grazed my cheeks, and it’s itchy.
The bluish-white light right in the middle of my eyes was the α star of Lyra, Vega. Like the Queen of the summer skies, it was the star of Orihime. Next to it was white smoky trail, probably the Milky Way. In that case, beyond it should be Altair of Aquila, Hikoboshi.
“Ah, is that it?”
“Eh, which one?”
“See, that really bright one.”
Yoshi-kun beamed as he pointed at the sky. I had a rough idea of which one it was, but I wasn’t sure if I was correct. There were tens of thousands of dazzling stars after all.
“Erm, well, I guess so. Deneb’s left, so let’s look for anything that might form a triangle. Ah, Yoshi-kun. That probably fits. I guess that’s Deneb. See, the Summer Triangle.”
After that, we began connecting the stars like kids who had just bought new toys, having much fun in the process. There’s Cancer with the red heart, Libra, Ophiuchus. Of course, there’s also Aquila and Lyra. We might have connected them, or might have connected different stars altogether.
Despite this, we’re happy.
Yes. I’m happy.
We flipped the pictures, looking at their stories, debating one after another about some unimportant stuff, not giving way, and nearly breaking into an argument. But the mood never got tense. Someone burst into a giggle, and the other got affected. The whole world was filled with two people’s laughter.
“Right, now then, the next page.”
Then, something fell out of the opened page.
It was something I had tucked at the page introducing Tanabata.
I lifted that up, and found a pink paper. There was nothing written on it. No, I had not written my wish on this Tanzaku

“They say it’s 15 lightyears.”
“Eh?”
“The distance between Orihime and Hikoboshi. It’s written here.”
Yoshi-kun pointed at the words ’15 lightyears’.
The two stars didn’t look very far when viewed from here. It seemed I could bring them into my clutches just by opening my arms wide. Despite that, it’ll take these two stars 15 years of lightspeed to meet. Was it not the same for Yoshi-kun and I?
He’s right within reach, and I was holding his hand, but our feelings, our hearts, were tens of thousands of miles away.
“They’re so far. But this is why they made wishes.”
“What do you mean?”
“They made wishes because they’re so far from each other, praying that they’ll be reunited with their beloved once ago.”
Yoshi-kun then told him of the two wishes they made. He said some really embarrassing stuff as he looked at the starry sky, but I didn’t dislike it.
“I guess. They really are full-fledged lovers. Anyone will be happy if the partner is to keep praying for their beloved to say such things.”
“Will you, erm, be happy about that, Yuki?”
“What?”
“No, erm. It’s more like, what will a girl typically think. Not that if I’m to say that.”
Yoshi-kun’s still looking up at the sky.
“…I might be happy.”
I imagined that scene, and my lips curled into a smile. Luckily, Yoshi-kun wasn’t looking at me.
I couldn’t let him know who I was thinking of. To cover my embarrassment, I looked up at the Milky Way, like Yoshi-kun did.
I imagined the magpie bridge upon the Milky Way. Surely its true identity was the wishes of those two Yoshi-kun spoke of. But if they had made their seemingly trivial wishes with similarly intense emotions, these wishes will become the hope for the reunion no matter how far they were.
And then, I overlapped the wish I should write along with theirs.
“Yoshi-kun, do you have a pen?”
“Yeah. Here.”
He pulled an oil-based pen from his pocket, and I used it to write my wish. He tried to peek a few times, but I shielded away from his sight with my back.
“No looking.”
“No matter what?”
“No matter what.”
“Got it.”
Yoshi-kun turned to look at his watch, and stretched his back fully.
“Now that you’re done, let’s go back. It’s kinda late.”
“Yeah.”

Once he saw that I put the Tanzaku into my pocket, Yoshi-kun turned to leave. I gave chase, only to stop and look up at the sky one last time. Then, I found that star.
It was an exceptionally bright orange glow amongst the cluster of stars. It's said that a long time ago, the Polynesians had this star leading them to Hawaii. If I look up at it and follow it like a compass, will I too arrive somewhere? Is that delight? Or happiness?
The name of the star filled with wishes was—
"Hōkūleʻa."
I said inaudibly enough for Yoshi-kun not to hear.
My gladness was still dazzling in the night sky far, far away.

July 7th.
After spending that day and week seeing the Tanabata Tanzaku, I visited the shopping street alone before returning to the hotel
There were many colorful wishes hanging on the green bamboo.
The orange lights shone upon them, and the light shining through caused them to dazzle. There were innocent wishes, matured wishes, prayers of self-encouragement, and they were all equally pretty. They were similar to the lights of the stars
I tugged gently at a yellow Tanzaku tied at the bottom. Written on it was:
"I want a girlfriend."
It'd be great if this was what Yoshi-kun wrote. I didn't know if he was a late bloomer, or that he had no such interest. And just to note, Yoshi-kun probably wished for something boring, like 'improve my grades'. Well, it's pointless, so I'll teach him how to study next time. Let's do it.
Of course, my promise's still a secret to Yoshi-kun. I made sure nobody's looking as I tied it at a place closest to the sky.
Even if he did see it, the him at this point might not be able to understand at all.
The fact that he went to see the stars with me days ago no longer existed anywhere. The conversations, the answer Yoshi-kun told me, none of them existed
I let go of the yellow Tanzaku, and took one, two steps away from the overflowing, noisy lights.
At this moment, the bamboo leaves rustled.
A gust blew.
"Woah, quite a strong wind here."
Someone said this, and then there was a mini ruckus.
I looked towards where the gust came, and lifted my head towards the sky, finding a wish fluttering in the sky. It's a pink wish, like sakura. I unwittingly reached out to grab it. I looked around, front, back, front, but I didn't know which side was it. For there was nothing written on it. Nobody knew if there was anything written on it to begin with.

Or that everything that was written vanished two days ago, at a certain time —
I didn’t know. I couldn’t be sure.
Despite that, I gently caressed that pink Tanzaku. Again, I entrusted my wish to that blank piece of paper.
I wrote down the two wishes Yoshi-kun told me of.
I managed to bluff my way through, but my consciousness was hazy due to the fever. I did somewhat remember Yoshi-kun bringing me to the hotel. I was relieved to see his face, and at peace when he called my name.
So, on that night. I connected the many stars together, and made a wish in my heart.

“Come look for me. Call my name."

This would be the thought needed for us to meet countless times.
Just as Vega made a wish to Altair
Just as Altair had prayed to Vega.
It would be great if Yoshi-kun would do so for me one day in the future, so I earnestly hoped.
And I placed that empty, sakura-like Tanzaku into my pocket.

Contact 193 - Where The Vote Goes

一票の行方

Contact. 193

“Haru□help me out here.”
There’s a little more noise than usual on this day, after school.
Everyone on the corridor looked busy, hurrying around, getting caught in the hectic vibe around the campus. I too was about to be swallowed by this mood, and I was about to do something when someone called for me.
I stopped, turned to the voice, and saw the grinning face of my friend not too far away.
“Ah, good work, Takuma.”
“Same.”
The autumn wind seemed more winter-like compared to yesterday, swaying a little of Takuma’s bangs as it came through the window, which made him look cool for some reason. A few girls walking by had some burning looks towards him, and I wondered, did he notice them?
But Takuma went towards me, not glancing at them.
“What do you mean, help? Just move the materials somewhere?”
His hands were filled with some kind of material, so I asked.
“Well, sorta?”
“Why are you asking a question?”
“Don’t sweat the small stuff.”
“No, I got a bad feeling about this.”
“Alright, alright.”
“Guess I should flat out refuse.”
"You say that, but you'll always help out in the end, Haru, so enough with the pointless questions, okay? Look, it's a waste of time to argue. Just give up."
This guy understood my personality so well, his voice was strangely brimming with confidence.
Takuma volunteered as a committee member for the success of our last culture festival in high school, so while he's a prep student, he's been busy running around all week. I saw his hard work, dedication and desire to make it a success up close.
I noticed the balance scales in my heart shaking, and I didn't need to be sure of the final answer, for the friend before me had made the decision. As a little resistance, I sighed, and reached my hand forward.
"Nn."
"I guessed so. Thanks man."
I received half of the materials from Takuma. I nearly let it drop as it's heavier than I imagined, and panicked a little.
"Be careful. That's not something we should be showing others."
"Really? Where are we moving these anyway? The staff room?"
"No, the news club."
"Wait, is this actually,"
Takuma's clearly leering away. The ominous feeling became conviction.

And at the same time, this selfish me was beginning to speculate, mostly about school grades. If I did anything to affect my grades in the second trimester of my third year, there's no turning back. The scales tilted greatly. Of course, I was headed in the opposite direction.
"I'm going back."
"Wait. To where?"
"To my own class. Ahh, got to help out with the exhibit."
"Don't worry. You're excused from helping out with that. I told everyone in class."
"Nn? What do you mean?"
"Basically, you don't have to help out. You got something else to do."
"Huh?"
"You get it now, Haru? There's nowhere for you to return."
Seemed like Takuma had done some deal behind my back. I could only lament my own misfortune at this point.
"Damn it. Those traitors."
Takuma gleefully slipped towards the clubroom building, and I could only glare at his back, tailing obediently and meekly. We went to the second level. The dark stairs were as serene as a water surface, and our footsteps were like ripples of the droplets landing upon the surface., ringing and dispersing.
Takuma reached the fourth level, narrowed his eyes at the commotion outside the window, and declared,
"Starting today, you're going to be part of the committee running the news club's pageant contest."
I knew it.
Our third year, our last culture festival.
And the start of my suffering.

"Heh, a pageant? Sounds interesting."
Yuki, walking next to me, muttered while drinking the iced tea from the PET bottle. It's winter, and she's called Yuki, which sounded like snow, but I could smell the sakura just by walking next to her.
The air's very fresh on this day, and the autumn sky above us was orange, a little forlorn. Nights were longer, so the time I could spend walking with her was about to end.
The familiar journey of heading home from school had been the part of the day I was most looking forward to recently.
We spent so little time together, but her existence was starting to become so big within my heart.
"I want to say this isn't fun at all, but I had fun during the first and second year, so I can't say anything about it. It's just that it's troublesome to be the guy don=ing it."
"Oh, I see, so you're the type to rank girls happily, Yoshi-kun."

"What's with that out of a sudden? But well, anyone can refuse to be invited or recommended for this pageant contest. Those that really don't want to do this can drop out beforehand."
"Uhuhu. You don't have to be hasty for excuses."
"I'm not hasty. I'm not looking for excuses."
"You are."
Upon seeing Yuki's grin, I realized I was had. Yuki had been saying it was interesting the entire time.
"You're really mean, Yuki."
"Really?"
"Yeah."
"You're not much different there, Yoshi-kun."
She giggled. For some reason, she's the one teasing me, saying I'm mean, but I didn't feel bad about it. I guess it must be because her voice was as delightful as a bell.
She stretched her leg out in a childish manner, walking on. Her body was cutting apart the light, and there was a dark little feminine silhouette formed at her feet. The shadow's face was pitch black as it imitated her, and its expression could not be seen, yet it looked so happy.
"Anyway, it's rare to see a pageant in high school. Don't they normally host it in college?"
"Ah, there's a reason."
"Reason?"
Yuki bent over, looking up at me. My heart fluttered as her hair did.
Goodness, my face's hot, even though summer's long over.
Yoshi-kun? She called my name. So I panicked and explained.
Why's there a pageant contest in my high school? There's a backstory to it. I wasn't even born when it happened. Everything started 30 years ago.

As Yuki had said, a pageant's typically organized in college, and our high school has it because of the passion of our seniors. As for why I knew about this, my dad's one of the earliest involved, and he always mentioned this whenever he got drunk.
For hygiene reasons, they couldn't organize anything related to food. And they couldn't organize mazes or haunted houses as they did not fulfill the requirements of being a school activity. Exhibits had to be related to the town's history or Greats. No jokes were allowed in their skits.
It seemed this was the kind of culture festival dad's era had.
There were thirteen seniors (warriors), whose names would never be recorded in the history books, worried about leaving behind grey memories of their cultural festival, so they gathered in the now extremely old gym warehouse, yelling with their fists clenched.
"So you guys, are you going to let your last memories of high school be so mundane?"
One of them started off, and the others let loose their frustrations.

"…No."
"Noooo! Th-this is just oppression!!!"
"I don't care what we do. I just want to end things off with a bang."
"Right, we can't accept this. But what do we do? The teachers have an ace."
"School grades?"
"If we play our cards too obviously, we'll get killed. There's no way back if we make a mistake here."
"Damn it. We're completely powerless here."
They might not have thought of doing something for real, probably just playing along. They were fine with venting their daily frustrations, or enjoying a little of the non-routine stuff. After some commotion, they would have returned to their daily routine.
But only one man amongst them was different. He was, simply put, really harboring ambitions,
"I have an idea."
The chairperson of the news club raised his hand. He was a straightforward fellow with a strong sense of responsibility, but nobody knew why such a person was present. The other twelve exchanged looks, but they shook their heads. Did you call him here? No, I don't know? Not you? No. Eh, then who? Nobody actually voiced out, but the worries persisted. One person finally had enough of the tension, and asked,
"Ohh~ tell us then."
The other eleven never voiced out, despite having the same thoughts themselves.
"So, everyone knows that our news club publishes a special edition during the culture festival."
"Ahh, that boring thing?"
"You've seen it? That's amazing. It's all words and I fell asleep just looking at it."
That man was nearly devastated by his comrades' cruel words, but he stood firm. This was not the time for emotions.
"Ahem. So what I want to say is, why don't we use that special edition for a pageant contest?"
"Pageant contest?"
"Simply put, a beauty contest of the elite girls in our high school. We just need to gather the contestants, whether they're recommended, or volunteered. We'll finish gathering the numbers three days before the culture festival, assign special codes for the students, and publish the results, but everything has to be done secretly. How about it? Are you willing to help me out?"
One had to wonder if it was a stroke of luck or misfortune, or that history was meant to be made. The thirteen gathered were all talents that could make this possible. There was the former student council president, along with the former presidents of the soccer, baseball, basketball and tennis clubs, the president of the literature club, a frivolous student who had vast

connections, the genius who was ranked first in school, a person who somehow was highly adored by his juniors, a harem prince, a smart guy capable of such pranks, along with a genius capable of doing the boring stuff.
All they needed was motivation. Once that motivation was lit,
"Let's do it."
Nobody knew who said that, for the twelve present had the same thoughts. Oh, let's do this. Isn't this fun? Such words and passion echoed, but nobody voiced out the most important reason.

Even if this was exposed, they could pin the blame on the news club president.

And at that moment, none of them thought they would have taken the first step of continuing this pageant contest that lasted so many years.

I told Yuki of the vague story I heard from dad, along with some exaggerated gestures, which cheered her up greatly. She seemed really curious about this story.
"Sounds nice. I guess this feels like youth after all."
"I don't think it's something that amazing, but it might be to dad and everyone. He's always delighted to mention this."
"But I don't think that's something you're good at, Yoshi-kun. Why are you helping out with this?"
"Look, I was betrayed. I got a friend called Akane, and I think she just wants to cause me trouble."
I said with a tragic tone, and unexpectedly, Yuki blinked hard a few times, so I continued on, never noticing that I misunderstood the reason why she was so troubled.
"She's Akane Rindou, probably the most famous person in our school. She's from the swimming team, a hard worker. She participated in the nationals.
"A girl?"
"Well, yeah."
"Heh. I see."
While we're talking, Yuki's eyes narrowed.
"And then?"
Eh, for some reason the mood changed completely. Yuki's clearly smiling, but she didn't seem like she was, since her eyes clearly weren't.
For some reason, I felt fear. I didn't know if it was just me, but there seemed to be an Asura behind Yuki's back when she asked.

"Uh, huh. And then there's another one called Mizuki Takehara-san."
"Another girl?"
"Y-yeah."
"I understand. I have some things to say, but do continue."
I rubbed my eyes hard, but the Asura never vanished. Seemed like it got bigger. So I gulped, making a weird sound.
"Eh, erm, I'll continue. That Takehara-san's somewhat an idol of our school. Ever since we entered this school, she won the pageant contest twice. Akane's the only one capable of being her rival, but she always refused to participate. Seemed like this year, she's willing to participate as long as everyone can agree to a certain condition."
Takuma and I paid a visit to the news clubroom.
Everything started without me knowing anything. It's the first time I went to the clubroom, but my seat's already there, and the juniors gave me kind looks as though they're inviting freshmen. Some even gave me thumbs up, some winked at me. My peers who had yet to retire from the club were leering heinously.
I questioned Takuma with a stare, and Takuma finally blurted that as long as everyone could fulfill a condition, she's willing to participate in the contest.
"The condition is that Haru (me), is to help out in the contest."
It seemed that was the situation, so Takuma, as a committee member of the culture festival, was working his hardest to fulfill her request, and my classmates betrayed. After all, this would mean everyone could get to see the showdown between Akane and Takehara-san.
This pageant contest would be the liviest in recent years.
Soon after, Yuki, who had been listening quietly the entire time, finally spoke up,
"So, why did Akane-chan say such a thing?"
"I'm not too sure either. Takuma said it's some kind of revenge."
"How do you treat other girls anyway, Yoshi-kun?"
Yuki’s voice remained spiteful, and I ended up raising my pitch.
“Ah, no…that’s, well, Akane invited me out a few times, but I rejected them all. It’s not like I did anything special, just that I went alone. She probably hates this fact.”
Yuki tilted her head in confusion.
“…Rejected? Even though she’s a cute girl who could have won the pageant?”
“Yeah.”
I answered, and for some reason, “Really? I see. So you rejected her…”Yuki muttered happily.
“Goodness me, Yoshi-kun. You’re a hopeless me.”
And then she patted me on the shoulder.
“Erm, Yuki? You’re not angry?”

“Well, yeah. You just mentioned another girl to a girl here. You don’t understand a girl’s heart at all. But I forgive you since I’m hearing something that makes me happy.”
Eh? Did I say anything?
“So now I’ll show mercy and spare you this time. I too have some responsibility in this matter, so do your best and make this pageant contest a success. But there’s still something I can’t accept. What do I do now?”
“What is it?”
“Hmm~ Let’s leave it as a secret for now.”
Yuki grinned, baring her teeth as she placed her long index finger on her lips, making a hush.
Girls really are inscrutable.

“Ahh, thank you so much for helping us out, Haru-senpai. We’re really short of hands here.”
The second year Ookubo-kun was seated before the only computer in the news club. He mentioned ‘lack of hands’, but he certainly has two. Anyway, all I see were those two hands being idle, and the word document being completely blank. The cursor was blinking away, as though anxiously awaiting the input of words.
“Enough with the courtesy. We don’t have enough people, so do two people’s work.”
“Right. Ah!”
“What?”
“Computer’s dead. It’s an old one. Looks like we’ll be waiting for another three minutes.”
“Wait for another three minutes? My foot. If you’re bored, do something else. Ah, hey, Minegishi-san, you dropped something.”
I called for my junior who had been scurrying around the club room, and picked up a very old photo book she dropped. Its cover was tanned beige, the title worn out, and It’s difficult to make out what the words were. It’s probably the name of this high school though.
“Ah, sorry. Thank you for picking this up. It’s careless of me to drop the secret recipe.”
“What secret recipe? Can I unleash a killer technique with that?”
“Not impossible, I might say.”
Not impossible? Now I’m a little curious. And once I looked towards the old notebook in my hand, she said, “A killer technique might be hyperbole, but you can have a look if you’re interested.”
“Can I?”
“It’s fine since you’re a member of the news club now,Segawa-senpai.”
“Don’t mind if I do.”

I flipped the first page, and saw a photo that was heavily faded. On the photo was a really pretty girl, a feisty one it seemed. The shapes of the eyes and ears reminded me of someone, but it's probably just me.
After all, I had no impression of the name 'Asuka Mizumori' under the first pageant contest winner. I flipped to the next page, and as expected, there's another photo of a pretty girl.
"This is…well."
"Yes, this is the photo album of the past pageant contests. It's passed down the news club for generations. Duplicating or taking it out is forbidden, and non-members need permission to look at it. This book is really valuable, and there was once a riot because of this. Takehara-san's phot is on the last page. It's amazing that she managed to win twice. If she repeats, that's unprecedented.."
I closed the book firmly, and returned it to Minegishi-san, who seemed proud of it for some reason.
"Better keep this dangerous item properly. Anyway, have you obtained the class lists?"
"Yes. They filled in their names and votes."
"There'll be trouble if there's a mistake, so check through and make sure each class' vote is easy to classify. Ookubo-kun, help me out here."
"Alright."
"It'll be great if we can finish by today. I'll deliver the rest to the class reps tomorrow."
"Eh? We can't have you work so hard for us."
"Right, we decided. If the teachers spot us, it'll be easier to pass it off as me delivering to the various classes. I'm on good terms with the committee after all, so I can say I'm doing errands for them. Please continue to take care of me."
I gave brief instructions to the junior who was brazenly attempting to slack, and the junior who was trying to finish something beyond her capabilities, before returning to my assigned seat. The current president of the news club Tanabe barged into the clubroom. There were thick black rings beneath his eyes, and his face seemed skinner, or was it just me?
Once he say me, he made a zombie-like sound.
"Haru, how's the preparations for the 'special column' to be given to the teachers?"
"We got the third year committee members to help out. Guess we'll reuse the theme from four years ago? Hmmm…exhibit highlights, the classes to look out for. Deadline's today, so we should b be able to collect it today."
"Ah, Segawa-senpai, classes C and E have replied. They're on my table."
Minegishi-san notified me without looking up from the name list.
"Guess that's that, Tanabe. Sorry, you mind checking through the drafts?"
"Can you please stop pushing work onto me?"
"I can't be reading that draft though. I'm just here to help."

I looked towards the materials in my hand. If these weren't handled immediately, the table would be chock full of paper. I'm in charge of checking the typos, while Tanabe's in charge of designing the cover. So I shoved everything beyond my job scope to Tanabe, who looked really annoyed by this, but he pretended not to notice. He let my behavior slide, since he knew it was pointless to yap away. He wasn't going to kick up a fuss as long as I didn't greet him.
The documents on the table were finally whittling down in numbers, and I could finally see the cream color of the table. I heaved a sigh of relief, and stared at the whiteboard with the schedule written on it. There's an 'interview with Akane Rindou at 1730' under my name. Basically, the pamphlets promoting the upcoming interviews would be the voting paper..
I saw the schedule dozens of times on this day, but obviously, no matter how many times I looked at it, the plans on it would never disappear.
"Hey, Tanabe."
"Hm? You better do it. Someone nominated you."
The friend frowning away was marking the document with a red pen, and blocked my retreat completely before I could discuss whatever was on my mind.
"But seriously…it's a little embarrassing to be interviewing a friend."
"Stop being picky. If Princess Akane's fans are to hear those words, they'll slaughter you. You're here because this is the condition for her participating in this pageant contest."
"I guess."
"So do your job." Tanabe glared at the pile of neverending documents. "This is my responsibility, and that's yours. Get it?"
He's about ten times busier than me, and I couldn't say anything to that. It's time I will myself into doing this. I took a large sigh, but the voice never reached anyone, for everyone else was bsy dealing with their duties and responsibilities..
I couldn't be the only one shirking my responsibility.
"Alright, I'm heading out."
"Yeah, see you later."
I took the voice recorder and foolscap, and with my friend's words nudging me on, I left the clubroom. This room's still noisy after school despite the doors being closed, and it's a lot more comfortable than I initially thought.

The interview place was an empty classroom in the clubroom building. With a creak, I opened the door, and found two tables facing each other in the classroom. Akane was seated on a chair. She was scowling, looking really unhappy.
"Sorry to make you wait."
"Nn."

She tersely responded, her hand on her sidelong face. She wasn't looking at me. I was concerned, thinking this really wasn't like her, so I sat at the empty seat, and called for her again,
"Akane?"
"Nn?"
Her response remained aloof.
But I couldn't just waste my time here, so I just slapped the papers on the table to get her attention. Akane didn't look at me though, and then I noticed that her face was red. Was she—
"Akane, are you nervous?"
"What, can't I?"
"Ah, not that you can't, just that…"
"Just what?"
Akane finally turned towards me, her eyes filled with some murderous intent.
"You're already used to giving interviews, aren't you?"
Akane Rindou was the hero of this high school; actually, the town. She had a very attractive face, was cheery as a sun, and had the talent to enter the Nationals swimming competition, along with the hard work allowing her to reach that level. She had many such student interviews, and even appeared in the town promotional posters. Why's she feeling nervous though?
"Grrr…I'm kinda used to it, but I'm not used to being interviewed by you though."
Akane tapped her fingers on the table,
"You're saying something ridiculous. Anyway, you're the one who wanted me to interview you."
"Well, yeah, that's true. Haru, has anyone said you don't understand a girl's heart?"
Just days ago, Yuki said the same thing to me. I had some self-awareness, but it's pretty boring to be told the same things over and over again.
"Y-you're annoying. Anyway, that has nothing to do with this now."
"It matters a whole lot, you idiot, big idiot. Whatever, let's start."
"Agreed."
An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. With this going on, I pressed the switch of the recorder, and there was some static.
The orange sunset shone through the window, dyeing our flanks red.
"So, ahem, Akane Rindou-san, please state your reason for participating in the pageant contest, and also some words to promote yourself."
"That's all?"
"Yeah. Everyone gets about ten lines, so please summarize as much as you can."
"Just to ask, Haru, why do you think I'm participating in this contest?"
"Seriously, how would I know? I won't have to interview you if I do."
"There's something I want."
"Want what?"

“Hmmm, that’s a secret for now.”
“I can’t interview you like this, you know?”
“Let’s end it then.”
Akane stood up from the table, leaned forth, and reached for the recorder, stopping it. There was silence, and it was only at this point that I realized I was alone with a girl, and starting to feel a little tense. I gulped, the sound emphasizing how nervous I was.
"You...you haven't said anything to everyone though."
Akane, whose face I was already used to seeing, looked a little different from usual. It's definitely due to the nice sunset shining on her.
"Well, you can write whatever's appropriate. I'll do my best, or please support me. Hey, more importantly, there's something I want to ask. Who did you vote for last year, Haru? I guess it's Mizuki?"
"Y-yeah. I voted for Takehara-san. Eh, it doesn't matter who I vote for. I guess the safest choice is to vote for the most popular, right?"
I was ashamed of the last words I spoke of. To whom was I trying to give excuses to?
"Oh, I see. What about this year?"
"Eh?"
"Who are you voting for this year?"
Akane took a step closer. Whose loud heartbeat was that? Mine or hers? I scanned the room, and then met Akane in the eyes. It felt like it's been a long time since this happened. Her eyes, nose and lips were within reach. At the same time, we realized that we were too close to each other.
We were so close that if one side had wanted to, we could have touched.
"A-Akane?"
And Akane made a hasty retreat.
"Woah. S-sorry for saying something weird. Please forget about it."
"Y-yeah."
She hurried turned away, shriveling and groaning as she covered her face.
She's acting a little weird today, and so was I. Why was my heart beating so fast? The minute hand of the round clock hanging on the wall continued to tick. 1 minute, 2, 3. Time wouldn't stop; it would only continue on. Surely the two of us were the only ones remaining still in this world.
The silence caused our hearts to race.
The first to lose the contest of patience was Akane.
"An-an-an-anyway, Haru, you know the real reason why this pageant contest started?"
"Re-re-re-real reason? Sorta. M-my dad was part of it."
Our conversation was extremely awkward, clumsy actors reading from a fixed script, it felt like. Ah, but even so, whatever we said, the rusted gears began to click together, running as normal. It seemed this conversation was a nice lubricant.
“Heh~I see. My dad was the same. But the reason you know of might be a little different from the truth.”

“What do you mean?”
“The one who proposed the pageant contest was the president of the news club. Do you know? My mom told me that my dad’s that president, so I as the daughter know that a stupid, gaudy boy came up with an unsurprising mischief, along with all his courage, to get a certain thing. I want that thing too..”
“What’s going on? Mind explaining in simpler terms?”
“You curious?”
“You said so much already. Of course I’m curious.”
Akane got up from the chair, and reached her hand out towards the sky turning dark. The sunset shone through the gap, raining upon her face, dampening it. She narrowed her eyes, as though pondering.
“Well, I guess. I’ll tell you the rest later, once I win.”
She muttered, still looking away from me.

I walked down the corridor once the interview ended. No, actually, I didn’t get to interview her. My mind was relieved from the tension, and I continued to think about Akane’s demeanor, words, and the true backstory of the pageant contest, but I never got the answer. At this point, I didn’t know how to deal with these feelings.
Before I knew it, I had returned to the clubroom. Like usual, I opened the door, and greeted everyone.
“I’m back.”
“Oh.”
But for some reason, it was Takuma, not the news club members, who welcomed me. He was lying on the red sofa, reading the manga that was left years ago in the clubroom.
“What are you doing here?”
“Delivering the drafts. Isn’t the deadline today?”
In response to Takuma’s words, Tanabe waved a piece of paper.
“And your reason for reading manga?”
“I’m resting, resting. Anyway, Haru, sorry about this, but mind keeping quiet for a while?”
“Why.”
“I’m getting to the exciting part. Will be done in 5 minutes..”
“Get out there and work.”
“Don’t say that man, this Takuma-senpai’s overworked..”
For some reason, the one coaxing me was Ookubo-kun. Argh, my head heads.
“Why is Takuma the more esteemed?”
“The difference in verbal etiquette?”
Only then did I realize it was pointless to talk to Takuma, who was humming away, so I ignored him, left the recorder and the blank new foolscap on the table. “Haru-senpai, the photos are done.” I praised the two juniors who

were clearly clamoring for my approval, and finally wiped off my name's name off the whiteboard.
Takuma spent exactly 5 minutes reading the manga, and got up, looking a little satisfied.
"I'm glad."
"About what? A happy end in that manga?"
"That's one. Another is that you're finally getting to work. I was actually worried, since I dragged you into this. Ah, sorry."
While talking, Takuma's pocket shook. He took out a smartphone from it.
"You can't bring that to school."
"Don't be so rigid, man. It's just for the culture festival. I can't give other people instructions without this. Eh, what?"
At that moment, his face froze, and the mood got tense. Everyone sensed this with their skins, their attention gathered upon him.
"Uh oh."
"What is it?"
"Looks like news reached that Kozato. She's heading here."
I didn't know how it was like back then, but most of the teachers were quietly okay with this. Some of the teachers were already alumni to begin with, and the special cover was well disguised. If any problem occurs, the contest's over, but we're working hard to ensure this wouldn't happen.
It's just that some of the teachers wouldn't allow for this to happen.
Kozato-sensei was one of those teachers. She had just joined our high school, was a serious one, and her lessons were easy to understand, but she's a little too inflexible, so most students couldn't handle her.
"But how?"
"I don't know. All I know is that Kozato's in the south block. She'll be here in 5 minutes."
I looked over at the votes on the table in a panic. Those were the results of Minegishi-san's hard work. There's also 80% of the voting collated in the hard disk of the computer.
Takuma acted decisively.
"Stuff the votes into the cardboard boxes, and drop them down the balcony to the photography club. As for the computer…"
Ookubo-kun raised a hand apologetically.
"Sorry, it's lagging."
"Now of all times? You got to be kidding. Whatever, pull the plug."
"B-but, we may lose data here."
"Did you save a backup?"
"Nope."
"Don't say that so proudly man. Ahh whatever."
Takuma cussed, and grabbed me somewhat anxiously.
"Haru, go stop Kozato."
"Why me?"

“She got a good impression of you, right? Just buy us 5 minutes. We’ll figure out something.”
They were beginning to move before they stopped talking. Takuma was calling someone on the phone, but he was still staring at me.
I tried to formulate a plan in my mind.
First, I would bump into Kozato-sensei, and then I would talk to her. We’ll talk about my future prospects, or lessons. Ah, no good. I couldn’t imagine myself delaying her for a minute. Time continued to pass, but everyone else was trying their best to fulfill their objective.
Takuma was looking really anxious, but he was giving me a look I had never seen before. That expression was clearly saying—

You'll always help out in the end, Haru, so enough with the pointless questions, okay? Look, it's a waste of time to argue. Just give up.

This was the ridiculous amount of trust from the friend who understood my personality really well.
So I ran. All I could do was run.
To fulfill the mission given by my friend.
I ran down the corridor, and down the stairs. Since she’s coming from the south block, she would be passing through the link bridge on the second floor. I ran from the 4th floor to the 3rd, jumping seven steps down. BAM, it sounded like an explosion, and I continued to the 2nd floor while riding on this momentum.
As expected, my target was there. She’s an outstanding beauty, but the eyes behind the glasses were sharp, harsh looking even. She noticed me, and chided me with that authoritative voices.
“Hey Segawa, stop running on the corridor.”
“Sorry.”
I managed to get her attention, as I had wished for, but the most important part was after. I had a plan to misdirect her, but I didn’t think I would succeed. Without a backup plan, I could only charge on.
So I slowed down before Kozato-sensei, tilting forward a little unnaturally, putting my hand on my tummy as though there was something hidden within my school uniform.
“W-wait, where are you rushing to?”
“To-toilet.”
“Your tummy hurts?”
“Y-yes.”
I deliberately raised my voice. Come on, doubt me already. Just doubt that I’m running from the news clubroom and hiding something. Once she doubted me, I could have naturally answered, and then I could buy some time.

But,
“Really? Sorry about that. Hurry on..”
Kozato-sensei replied.
“Eh…”
“But do not run down the corridor.”
“Al-alright.”
The completely flawed strategy naturally failed.
And worse, I was rebuked nicely because of her kindness.
“What? Hurry on.”
“Eh…erm. Well…”
Argh, my mind’s completely blank. I couldn’t think of anything. At this moment.
Someone else was running down the same corridor as I did. It’s Ookubo-kun, slouching with his arms covering his stomach.
And once he saw us, or Kozato-sensei, he stopped and tried to run away.
That simple move was the difference between him (success) and me (failure).
“Ookubo, hold still. Where are you going?”
“Toilet.”
“…What are you hiding?”
“Nothing at all.”
Unfolding before my eyes was a scene I had imagined.
“Besides, isn’t Haru-senpai running on the corridor? I saw that.”
“Segawa’s having a tummyache.”
“I’m running to the toilet too.”
“Stop lying.”
“I’m not. I’m really going to the toilet. You trust Haru-senpai, and not me?”
“That’s because you skipped 5 classes with this trick!!”
Kozato-sensei’s bellow echoed through the corridor, which nearly shook the clubroom block entirely. However, Ookubo-kun wasn’t rattled. What he did next was really impressive. He looked dumb, and anxious, and finally said deflatedly, having bought the five minutes I needed.
“Actually, I heard there’s an actress at the front gates.”
“Actress?”
“Well, I’m not sure if that’s real. They say she’s a real beauty, and like, there’s a crowd at the school gates. I need to get the scoop as a news club member, right?”
And then, he pulled out a mini digital camera from his uniform, which basically hinted at it being his last move.
“Haa…I’ll go over then. Can’t let the commotion slide. Go back to the clubroom now, Ookubo. I’ll head over soon. Don’t try to run away.”
Kozato-sensei left us behind and went off. It seemed she had forgotten all about me. Once that authoritative silhouette vanished, I lowered my head to Ookubo-kun as thanks.
“Thank for the great help.”

I alone wasn't able to slow her down for 30 seconds.
"Good work."
"What about the computer?"
"It recovered soon, and we got a backup. I think we're about done transferring the boxes, so I'm here to help."
"Really? Great."
"We're really lucky. At first, we're trying to figure out how to create some big news to lure Kozato-sensei over, then we got intel of a super cute girl standing at the front gates. So we wanted to make use of that. There should be at least 30 people there now, since Takuma-senpai's stoking the flames. Argh, it drives me mad. I want to look to. Heard that she's super duper cute, even Rindou-senpai and Takehara-senpai are inferior to her."
Front gate?
Pretty girl?
It was then that I noticed something.
"Haru-senpai?"
I had a bad feeling.
I had a really bad feeling. There's still a long time until our next meeting, but ever since I met her, she has always been waiting for me at the school gates. Most importantly, there's one person I knew who's prettier than Akane.
"Where are you going? Eh? To the toilet? For real?"
My junior loudly asked a completely off base question, and I ignored it.
I ran downstairs several times faster than I did, darted by the shoe cabinet, and arrived at the main gate.
Just as I heard, Takuma was riling the students in a circle. Kozato-sensei had not arrived. She must have been walking.
"Please excuse me. Sorry, excuse me."
I forced my way through the crowd, and bumped into a few shoulders and elbows, even getting scolded. It hurts, but that's nothing. There's something else more hurting.
That's my chest. The pain's driving me forward.
Over there was,
"Ah, Yoshi-kun, say, what's going on? Did I do anything wrong?"
Yuki was looking flustered to the point of tears.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."
Before Kozato-sensei could arrive, I led Yuki out from the school, and stopped at a nearby family restaurant. She was seated on the chair, the book in her hands as she covered her face with it the entire time.
"This is unforgivable."
"I'm really sorry."

“I said I won’t forgive you. That shocked me. I was suddenly surrounded, and everyone was looking so scary. Never thought it’s your fault. This is unbelievable.”
Her voice was shaking, but I couldn’t sense any anger. It was all fear, shame, and helplessness. It would be a lot better for me if she was outraged instead.
“Well Yuki, I just apologized.”
She might not have seen it, but I had my head lowered, my forehead on the table.
The surrounding adults might have thought we’re having an argument. The restaurant’s really rowdy, but my ears distinctively picked up on the voices nitpicking us. 99% of them…eh, let’s face the facts. All of them were talking about me.
“That bastard made such a cute girl cry. If it had been me—”
What could you have done if it was you? Would you not have hurt Yuki if it was you instead?
I could have ignored everything else, but this line was the one that really hurt my heart. Time was the only thing moving on
My head was lowered the entire time.
“————fait.”
“Eh?”
“…I want parfait.”
I frantically lifted my head. I was not mistaken. It was Yuki’s voice.
I didn’t know of the expression she made, but I was glad that she at least made a compromise, so I grabbed onto the chance she gave me. I immediately called for the waiter, and ordered parfait and self-service drinks.
After 5 minutes or so, the waiter served us strawberry parfait. Finally, she put down the book. Her pretty little face was red all over, nose, cheeks, eyes.
“I was really scared.”
“I’m sorry. I really am.”
Yuki scowled again, and while being so emotional, she attempted to swallow the parfait whole or so while bringing it to her mouth. She eked a voice from her throat, saying it’s delicious, and then…
“I want some red tea.”
“Got it. Hot? Or iced?”
“Hot.”
“Got it.”
As she wished, I ordered some tea for her, along with cake, and coaxed her for another 20 minutes.
“I’m really sorry, Yuki.”
Again, I lowered my head in apology to calm her down. She sniveled softly, and finally nodded.
“Alright, I forgive you.”

I heaved a sigh of relief after hearing these words, but just for a moment.
“But” as Yuki moved her red lips again,
“You have to make me a promise.”
“I’m all ears.”
“For sure?”
“Yeah.”
She stared at me right in the eyes, nodded, and stated her wish,
“Write my name in that vote for the pageant contest.”
“What do you mean?”
“What else? Exactly that.”
“No, Yuki, you aren’t a student of our school. It’s pointless for me to do that. That vote will be invalid.”
“No, it really be.”
Yuki whispered, as though she was mentioning something important.
“I hope that for your vote, you won’t write Akane-chan’s name, or Mizuki-chan’s name, but my name. That’s enough. This will be a vote more valuable than hundreds and thousands of them.”
“Ehh, I don’t get what’s the point of that, but since you say so, I promise you.”
Yeah. If it’s what Yuki wish for, I’m going to fulfill it no matter what it is.
“I’ll write your name on. It’s nothing big anyway.”
“It’s a deal then. I’m going to ignore you if you lie to me..”
Yuki’s eyes were still a little damp as she glared at me.
I didn’t know how to respond to this, so I finally said something really unimportant.
“Ah, speaking of which, that bookmark’s pretty cute.”
There’s a bookmark clasped between the pages we were looking at.
“Cute? This paper is plain though.”
“No, eh…yeah, the pink’s nice. You see, it’s pretty, looks like sakura.”
Ah, why am I saying this? See, isn’t Yuki all startled now, At this moment, my thoughts stopped, for Yuki was beaming really happily.
It’s the first time she showed me a smile on this day.
“Thanks. Yeah, this is really pretty, but this isn’t actually a bookmark—”
And then, she said,
“This is actually my ‘wish’.”

Results wise, the culture festival was really successful, the pageant contest far beyond expectations. Akane alone had 40% of the votes, and won overwhelmingly.
Right now,
Under the distant autumn skies, I aimed the digital single-lens reflex camera hidden by the photography club at Akane. I had to take her photo, for as the winner of the pageant contest, her photo was to be recorded in

the annals. Beyond the lens, Akane reached her hand for the reddened leaves, took one of them, and brought it to her mouth, covering it.
"I think this happened before."
She grinned, and I couldn't resist the urge to click the shutter. The sound echoed, and an instance in this world only I know of was taken.
“Did you take a photo of that?”
“I can’t?”
“You can’t.”
“Why?”
“I haven’t made a pose.”
For some reason, she didn't sound as energetic as usual.
"You don't have to make one."
The photography club acquaintance I knew of looked as though I had just murdered his father. When he lent me this digital SLR camera, he taught me a trick, to keep clicking on the shutter. Listen Haru, I'm not going to teach you any shutter, focus or lighting techniques. This camera will automatically deal with those troublesome bits. Your job is to talk to Rindou-san, get her to relax, and keep shooting. I don't care if you take hundreds or thousands of them. Even as an amateur, you might get a miraculous shot.
Now this wasn't difficult.
Snap.
Another instance was recorded.
"Ah, you took another one."
"This is my last job after all."
Beyond the lens, I saw Akane's anxious, perturbed, angry and pouting faces, turning each and every one of them into data (memories).
"I told you not to take anymore. Make sure I'm cuter if you want to."
"Don't worry, you're always cute."
Snap.
I nonchalantly answered as I kept taking photos.
"Eh?"
Snap.
The entire world of photos taken−
"Wh-whawhawhawhawhat are you saying?"
"Well, if you aren't, you wouldn't have won the pageant contest."
Snap.
She was redder than the leaf in her hand.
"Ah, I see. I guess so. Otherwise you would have…"
"Don't worry, I feel the same."
"Ehhhhhhhhhhh!!??"
Snap.
The face was filled with shock and unbridled joy.
"R-really?"
"Of course."

And for every snap on the shutter, Akane got increasingly charming. And thus I knew that at this moment, my index finger on the shutter would capture the prettiest photo I could get of Akane."
"I see. Fufu. I'm glad."
Snap.
As expected, the girl before me showed a smile I never saw before. The warm smile was filled with such bliss.
After the shooting ended, Akane snatche the camera, wanting to check the photos. After ten minutes or so, she returned the camera to me, and the many photos from before had been reduced to two.
One of those was the red leaf covering her mouth. And the other was her smile (best shot).
"Why?"
"You don't need the others now, right? Use the photo with the red leaf for the photo album. Take print two shots of this smile and delete it. Don't show it to anyone else."
"Why two?"
"...A reward for this hardworking Haru. Akane-chan's very kind, so one for her, and one for you. Rejoice. This is the photo of the most popular girl in school."
Once she quickly said these words, she skipped forward, as though hiding her expression from me. She spun on the spot, letting her skirt dance with the leaves. Her hair was a little longer than it was in the summer, and it swayed along too. The eyes staring intently at me were the only unfaltering ones. Soon after, Akane said,
"Ah, yeah. Got to fulfill that promise."
She, buried in the sea of red, restarted the topic we discussed about,
"A long time ago, about 30 years back, there was a timid boy. He had a one-sided crush on the prettiest, most famous girl in the year, but he dared not talk to her, let alone confess."
She continued to walk backwards while facing me. In this quiet place, her voice remained undisturbed, clearly reaching me.
"Before they knew it, they entered the third year. The only events left for autumn were the culture festival and the exams. Back then, he had a thought, that he wanted to leave a memory of this crush. He came up with a loose plan, but finally got it to work, and got the outcome he wanted. He asked that girl to leave him a memory of the champion. You know the rest, don't you?"
I looked at the camera in my hands.
There was the photo of the prettiest girl of our year, no, the whole school. The face was reminiscent of the prettiest girl on the first page in the secret book. The shape of the ears were the same.
"So, Akane, your mom's Mizumori?"
Akane nodded.

"This contest started because my dad wanted my mom's photo. They treasure the photo very much even at this age. Leaving dad aside, this photo is the most important thing to mom,"
Was that the desired thing Akane spoke of?
"You realized it? Yeah, I wanted this photo. Mom looks happy whenever she speaks of this, and even I start to feel embarrassed."
"You should be looking for someone with better skills, right? I'm an amateur."
"Nope. Nobody else with better skills can take it any better. It's a photo only one person in this world can take, and that's you, Haru."
"Seriously, I'll be embarrassed to be praised like that. So I have some talent in photography."
"You idiot, this isn't what I mean. But I really got to thank you. Now for my last activity in high school, I have a memory on par with mom and dad. I want to share a memory with you. It's great for you to have my photo."
Saying that, Akane turned her back on me again, not hearing my response.
And then, as though she had thought of something, she asked with her back still turned on me.
“Say, Haru. Did you vote for Mizuki again this time?”
“Eh? No, I didn’t vote for her.”
“Really. That’s fine then.”
She proceeded to skip forth. She looked a lot happier, even swaying side to side as she walked.
I had a feeling she seemed to be mistaken about something. And because of that, I did not try to explain further—

My vote went neither to Takehara-san, nor to Akane,

Why did I cast a blank vote? Where did that vote go?
After school, in late autumn, I met the girl whose name I wrote on that white paper.
And so, that peerless beauty came to us, bringing us to our last winter together.

Contact 212 - Side.A Her Love

Side-A 彼女の恋

Contact.212

“Morning Akane.”
My friends began to greet me.
It’s a morning greeting that had never changed for a long while, but the impression I had of others would change just because of the way people would speak. It’s interesting.
Some were vigorous, some were lifeless; some were sleepy, and some were energetic.
If the colorless, transparent voices were dyed with color, they would make the world a lot more vibrant.
“Morning everyone~!”
I raised my chest proudly, shouting with a booming voice from deep within my lungs. This voice wasn’t dyed any other color, but with my own distinct color to the ‘morning’. It blended into the refreshing air of the morning, gradually vanishing afar.
I felt exceptionally happy, as though I was accepted by the world. Most importantly, being able to yell out loud had me feeling really relieved.
Huu. I exhaled some white air, folded my arms, and looked towards the familiar road before me.
The light shone from the sun, turning from orange to yellow, and then to white, before blending into a faint blue. It reached into the surrounding air, the divide between light and darkness dispersed by it, finally becoming one with the horizon. The unknown grass growing by the roadside was swaying with the wind, the night dew glittering under the sunlight.
This scene could only be seen for another month or so. Next Spring, the sakura would flutter, and I, no, we would graduate from this school.
And while I was feeling just a little sad, huuuuaaaahhh, I heard a yawn from somewhere.
“Akane. You’re too loud man.”
I stopped to turn towards the voice. My classmate Takuma Mikado was walking towards me.
I wasn’t exactly angry at him for deliberately covering his ears, but it did seem he wanted me to be angry, so I glared back intently, pouting and intending to say a few words.
Well, this is the ‘usual custom’ for us.
“It’s 10 people’s worth of greetings. Not my fault that I’m a little louder.”
“No, you don’t have to yell 10 times louder just because…”
“It’s not ten times louder. What are you talking about?”
“No no no, it’s about that loud. Look, the first years are scared of you.”
“Huh? Not at all.”
I looked in the direction Takuma spoke of, and looked into the eyes of a boy wearing a uniform with an ‘I’ on the collar. He’s almost done with his first year of high school, but his uniform was still brand new, his face stilled filled with some youthfulness.
Appearing on that youthful face was some skepticism. It was a pity, but it was as Takuma said.

I tried passing it off with a dumb smile, but the boy's face turned red, and he scampered off towards the school. It's adorable how he bowed politely and ran off, but I was increasingly guilty for scaring off such a good kid.
"Heh heh, someone's avoiding you."
And in contrast, this Takuma was really, really annoying.
"Shut up."
It would hurt to punch him from the front and hit the button, so I punched at his flank.
Of course, I didn't do it for real. I merely tapped him softly. Any ordinary boy tanking this punch would groan and cup his stomach. My fist felt a similar touch, "Ow." but Takuma merely responded. It seemed the abs he got from basketball training remained there even after he had left the club for a long time.
Back when he was in the basketball team, he would bring along a shoe bag and a large lunch box. Not so much nowadays. Like most of the going-home club, he was holding a large sling bag with some stationery and notebooks. The palms that were born to grab basketballs were used to carrying school bags. It might seem like overkill.
"That looks rather light on you.."
He grinned as he brought the sling bag dangling on his fingers to me.
"You get it, don't you? It's like half a year has passed, I'm still not used to it."
"Of course. I'm the same too."
My bag no longer contained the swimsuit, goggles and towel, and no snacks which I would secretly eat whenever I was hungry.
Once I retired from the swimming club, I became an ordinary student preparing for her finals, and those things were unnecessary to me.
"Yeah. We finally don't have to wake up early anymore."
"We can rest during the holidays too."
We started to talk about the stuff that got easier after retiring from our clubs as we continued on to school. This road to school was actually very short, even though it seemed very long, and before we knew it, we arrived.
"We're no longer hungry all the time."
"We don't have to keep running on cold days like this."
"Our bags are lighter."
"We aren't getting scolded by our captains. Not so sleepy in class, not called up so often."
"Not at all. We don't have to stay back and clean the clubrooms too, don't need to buy snacks, don't have to spend much on food. We aren't getting injured because of club activities, which is all good, but…"
"But…yeah."
"Yep."
"Ah."

Having said this much, we stopped. We continued walking forward, not consoling each other. The difference in height between Takuma and me was at least 10cm, but we saw the same thing.
We weren’t sad, but our nostrils were stinging, and we almost shed tears. Why’s that?
—And right at this moment, I found a familiar figure amongst the students dressed in the same uniform. My chest started to ring. This simple I immediately cast aside all the loneliness and sadness, along with the cold air of winter.
“Morning Haru.”
I was the first to spot him, but Takuma was the first to speak.
“Ah, morning, Takuma.”
"Hey Haru, listen man. Some first year just ran from her."
I had a feeling Takuma was about to say something unnecessary, so I kicked him in the calf for real. He yapped in pain, jumping around like a frog. He glared at me, wanting to say something, but he's the one at fault. There's no need for him to report this to Haru.
Naturally, I ignored Takuma's glare and smiled at Haru.
Haru. Haruyoshi Segawa. He's a friend of Takuma and me. And also, my—
"Morning Haru."
"Morning Akane. What's up with Takuma?"
"Who knows? Probably crazy now that he's studying too much."
"But he's glaring at you."
"He's always like this. More importantly, let's go to school."
I showed a little more enthusiasm in grabbing the hem of Haru's shirt. Actually, I wanted to grab his hand, but I couldn't muster my courage. However—
"Hey, Akane, what happened?"
Haru looked confused as he asked.
"What do you mean?"
"Well, I don't know what's going on. That's why I'm asking."
"Nothing happened."
"Really? Guess it's just me. Looks like you aren't really energetic."
Haru gently placed his hand on my head, as a repeat of a certain moment in the past.
Ahh ohh. Whenever I spoke to Haru, there would be a response moving away, something I wouldn't get from talking with Takuma.
I burst out laughing. Why did he say such things out of a sudden.
That Haru's too sleazy.
I like him.
I really, really do.
I mustered my courage to reach my hand to him, but I ended up looking at a leering Takuma. Uh oh, I forgot about his existence completely.
My face turned red immediately, probably to my ears.

I knew it was unreasonable, but I kicked the leering Takuma in the calf. A little softer this time, since I was doing so to hide my embarrassment.
"Ow."
But as expected, he was jumping around like a frog.
"What are you two doing?"
Haru chuckled dumbfoundedly.
"Eh, the entire time, Akane's been,"
"What about me?"
I shook my right foot, glaring at Takuma.
"Nothing."
"Really? Then good."
I grinned back too.
Takuma was scowling away, but he seemed to be enjoying this. After all, he was smirking.
Well, it didn't matter that Haru never noticed it at this point. This relationship was unexpectedly enjoyable.
It was the last month of our third year in high school.
I fell for my friend, Haruyoshi Segawa.
☀
I joined the swimming club back in middle school.
There wasn't any special reason why I chose swimming, of all the many sports clubs. Or rather, it's for the simple, most important reason, that I liked swimming.
The swimming club basically trained in school and the pool starting from the end of spring to the start of autumn, but our training for the next half year was the same as the track team. Swimming's really draining, so we had to train our stamina and muscles.
The second and third years would share the field with the track team, and as a first year, I had to run outside the school, along with the first year of the track team.
After the hot summer days were over, the skies of autumn were clear and vast, even though my hands could not reach there.
It was back then that Haru spoke to me. To be honest, I had a bad first impression of him.
Haru's been running with an unhappy look, and he's from the track team, but he was slower than me. No, it's definitely because he wasn't focused on running, but thinking of something else.
I was running the fifth round when I passed by the slowpokes of the pool team, including Haru.
"You're slow, Sone-san."
"You're too fast, Akane. You might be faster than the track team."
"Heh heh. I haven't gone all out yet."
I gave a V pose to my swimming teammates, and picked up the pace.
"I'm going off then."

I immediately left them far behind, and had a sense of superiority. In my glee, I got cocky in thinking I had the talent for long distance running.
My right knee ached immediately. At first, I felt something was amiss, that I could keep running as long as I slowed a little.
But the pain worsened, so I had to walk instead. I hated losing, and I hated stopping. I would push myself to the limit until I could no longer move.
I would continue to stand up, unless my body fell forward like this. I knew it's stupid, but this was my personality.
"Eh, Akane, what now? You're tired?"
And soon after, the group I had passed overtook me instead.
"You guys are so slow, Sone-san, so I just waited around. I'll catch up anyway."

"Damn it. I'll show you."
"Ohh, I'll be waiting."
Sone-san's voice and silhouette became distant, and vanished around the corner of the roasted meat shop. Nobody noticed my leg was hurting. RIght when I heaved a sigh of relief, someone spoke to me, which shocked me, and caused my heart to race.
"H-hyaiii!?"
"You alright? Is your knee hurting now?"
The one who spoke to me was the boy running last with an unhappy look. I coughed hard to hide the awkwardness of the strange sound I made."
"...That's not it. Erm."
"Haruyoshi Segawa of Class 4. Everyone calls me Haru."
"Haru, is it? I get it. I'm."

"I knew you. Rindou-san of Class 1, right?"
"Akane is fine. Guess I'll just call you Haru then."
"Got it. Say, Akane, your knee is hurting, right?"
"Not at all."
"Really?"
"Really."
"...You're really stubborn."
I didn't mishear what he just muttered.
"Hm? You said anything."
"No, it's nothing. It's troublesome now. Such people won't listen to reason. Ow, what are you doing?"
"You're making it loud for me to hear now, aren't you?"
In response to that grumble, I merely hit him on the shoulder. Even I wasn't brazen enough to hit a guy I met for the first time with all my might.
"Huh, I don't get what you're talking about."
Haru played dumb as he knelt down, picking up a red leag, saying,
"Looks pretty, doesn't it?"
"Yeah."

I nodded unwittingly, because it was. He smiled, and pointed above my head. Naturally, my eyes followed the red leaf in his hand, looking up at the sky.
I had lowered my head while running due to the pain, without realizing it.
He showed me why it was a pity I did so, for,
If I had lifted my head, I would have seen such a pretty world.
The leaves were dancing in the sky, every single one of them red, as though they were cutting through the sunset, and I marveled at how they contrasted the faint blue sky.
I had stopped before I realized it, and I ended up talking with that boy called Haruyoshi Segawa, until the club activities ended for the day. We didn't talk about anything big, just about how pretty the red leaves were, our complaints about the club, or rumors about the teachers, but we really enjoyed ourselves.
Just as I had chatted with Sone-san. No, I might be happier. I forgot about my knee pain without realizing it.
"Make sure you run at your pace tomorrow."
I noticed his clumsy kindness as he said these words and vanished into the sunset.

The seasons changed, and time passed.
Before I knew it, I started looking around for Haru.
He's kind of a weird guy.
Not that his actions, speech or appearance were weird. It's just that even with everyone around, he would keep his distance from others. He would look happy, make a fake smile nobody would care about. He thought nobody noticed it, so he never noticed that I did.
Haru changed though.
The fake smile appeared less often, and he was willing to say what he thought.
He started showing the kindness and honesty he already had.
It was at this moment that I found myself hopeless. I would admit that I had fallen for Haru.
Well, there's only one thing I didn't like though. It was harder for me to contact him during vacation, or after school.
What's he doing alone?
☀
As a student preparing for the finals, most of my day was spent studying.
I wanted to ask Haru if he would like to walk home with me, but he was staring at the textbook with a serious look even though the school bell rang, so I said goodbye to him before leaving.
The school building itself was quiet, but one could hear the juniors yelling from the grounds. They sounded a little lazy, though still passionate, and stung at my heart for some strange reason.

The twigs growing on the bare trees were swaying in fear of the cold. They would have to wait a little longer until the leaves and flowers would grow and bloom. Surely, I had to do the same.
I tightened the muffler acting as my safeguard against the cold, and went to the front gates. There were a few students stopped there, discussing something, it seemed. What's going on? They're all talking, but their voices were jumbled up, and I couldn't hear clearly.
"What's going on?"
I had to ask one of the junior boys closest to me. "Rin-Rindou-senpai!?" He exclaimed in shock. It seemed he recognized me.
"Yeah I'm RIndou-senpai. Good afternoon. What happened, an accident?"
"No, erm, it's because of that."
He probably determined it was faster to point with his eyes, so he look over to that 'person'. I too followed his eyes to look over. Well, one could tell what was going on just by looking over.
There was a girl standing a little farther away from the main gate. She was holding a pink bookmark and a hardcover book, the slender fingers hidden slightly within the sleeves flipping the pages.
The girl had fluffy long hair, and a perfect looking face, irregardless of size and position. The slightly large coat made her smaller than she really was. The face, earlobes and nose were reddened by the chilly winds, indicating she had been around for quite some time. She might have been alone the entire time.
The proof's that everyone, including me, dared only to watch her from afar. It's the first time I learned that exceeding beauty could intimidate people from approaching. A lot of courage would be needed to talk to her, or, a reason to inspire oneself.
So as I continued to stare at that girl.
"Ahh, isn't this Akane-senpai? Hello there."
Someone called my name. The voice came from behind the gates, the direction I came from, so I turned my face over. It's the current captain of the swimming club, Miya. I showed a friendly smile, waving at her.
"Oh, Miya? It's been a while."
"Why's everyone gathered here?"
"Well, I just asked the same question."
"Eh?"
Miya opened her mouth in shock, tilting her head in confusion.
Standing next to her was a weak looking girl. I had some impression of the hair with inner curls and droopy eyes. She's probably in her first year. As for her name, erm, yeah, Matsumae-chan.
"Good work."
I smiled as I talked to Matsumae-chan.
"Ah, yes. Good work, Rindou-senpai."
"Akane-senpai, are you going home now?"
"Yep."

"Let's go together then. We're going to Aria next. That place should be on the way, right?
Aria Sports Club was a multi-purpose sports facility with a gym, a sauna, and even an onsen. During winter, our swimming club members would use the warm water pool.
It seemed these two would be using the pool.
"I guess that's fine. Matsumae-chan, you don't mind coming along, right?"
Matsumae-chan nodded with her face still blushing. She really resembled a cute little animal.
"Okay, let's go."
FInally, I glanced aside at that beauty.
She was beaming away, probably because the person she was waiting for had arrived. I was thinking that if I, a fellow female, was mesmerized by her beauty, the boy would be overwhelmed immediately.
And I never noticed who she was looking at.

I followed the girls to Aria, wanting to change my mood for a bit.
It's been a while since I showed up, so that uncle called Watarai was happily welcoming me.
I came here often ever since I joined the swimming club, so I had known him for six years, and we didn't have to be courteous to each other, for good or for bad.
"Ahh, it's been a while, isn't it. Come by often. This uncle isn't motivated without seeing you in swimsuit, Aka-chan."
"That's sexual harassment, uncle!"
My response had the uncle guffawing.
"That cold look on your face is really something. Every time I say this to Matsu-chan, she would just blush and lower her head. Now that's really sexual harassment?"
"Matsu-chan, as in Matsumae-chan? She comes here often?"
"Yep, every day recently. If it's not her turn in the club, she would show up a little later. Just like a certain person back then."
"Heh. Is she fast?"
"Very. No, faster. I guess this is the period when she enjoys it most though. Even Miya-chan isn't a match for her in the butterfly and freestyle."
"I see."

"Do you want to race her?"
"Eh?"
"That's the look you're giving."
"Hm, yeah."
I decided to answer honestly.
"Go swim then."
"I'm preparing for my finals though. And I quit the club."

I took the ball point pen placed next to the sign-in book, twirling it in my hand. It was a reflection of my heart, just swaying by the side of my hand.
"You're not the kind to be satisfied with just that. And it's important to relax a little right? If you want to do it, go all the way."
Gahahaha, the uncle guffawed away, and I sighed hard.
"Seriously, uncle, that might be miscontrued as sexual harassment."
But I really did relax my shoulders. I stopped twirling the pen, and gripped it hard.

There was a unique atmosphere to the pool.
First of all, it just felt like there's a lot of moisture in the air. The moisture sticking on the skin might make it sticky. Also, there's a heavy chlorine smell. It's said some people couldn't take the smell, but at least for me, I didn't hate it.
I changed into the rented swimsuit, and was feeling excited. All, this was it, this was the feeling. I really loved swimming. After that, I spent time warming up for real, stretching, checking on my condition. Right, I was fine.
Once I was done warming up, Miya-chan poked her head out from the pool. The ripples she caused hit my toes.
"Huh, Akane-senpai, you're swimming?"
"Yep. I heard Matsumae-chan's really fast. You lost to her, didn't you, Miya?"
I asked, and Miya simply nodded, as though she had accepted it as fast, neither denying it hastily, nor ashamed.
It's because of her personality that I nominated her as the next captain.
"Yes, I lost. Matsuu's really fast."
"Faster than me?"
"I don't think she's faster than you at your best. But over the past few months, It's Matsuu who's worked harder and showed more progress."
"Yes."
"You haven't entered the pool for months, have you, Akane-senpai?"
"Yes."
"And you said that we can't tell who'll win until the contest is over, Akane-senpai?"
"Yes."
"So I can't answer this question."
"I see."
That's enough.
The junior who had followed me for two years said so, so at the very least, I could be sure that Matsumae-chan's the real deal.
Miya and I looked towards Matsumae-chan, who was swimming alone. The beautiful, textbook-like swimming pose showcased her serious personality. Soon after, her hand touched the edge of the pool. She shook away the water on her body, removed her goggles, and noticed our stares, looking very confused.

"S-senpais, what is it?"
"Hey, Matsumae-chan, race against me."
"Eh?"
"Don't eh me now. Race me now. Race."
I pointed a raised fist at Matsumae-chan, who shook her head in an increasingly exaggerated manner. She looked like a puppy who had finished showering.
"No I can't. No no no no no no no."
Matsumae-chan probably said no about a hundred times at least as I dragged her out from the pool and forced her onto the starting block. It was a little cruel, especially when she looked like she's about to cry, but she couldn't run as Miya had played her power card, 'captain orders'.
But speaking of which. Even when I stood next to her, she was just a weak-willed junior.
Those amazing ones would give off a unique presence. Reality's not a battle manga, so there's no aura or power levels to be seen. If the opponent had self-confidence based on ability however, that could be sensed through the skin.
Matsumae-chan did not have any of that.
"Sorry to force you into this."
"Eh, erm."
"But I'm going all out."
"Erm, Rindou-senpai?"
"What?"
It seemed Matsumae-chan had made up her mind, her expression more determined than before.
"No, errm, I'll do my best too."
Ready, Miya shouted.
Matsumae-chan and I arched down in unison.
It was at this moment that I realized the nature of my upcoming opponent. She's still lacking in self-confidence, but was earnest about swimming, and very focused. Her eyes probably ignored my presence completely. I thought of the opponents in the past I wasn't able to beat, remembering that some of them had similar eyes to her.
Uh oh, I was about to be swallowed up.
Right when I had this thought, Miya shouted,
"Start!"
The long years of experience got my body moving, but I wasn't focused, and lost the best moment. My angle entering the water was poor. The air bubbles formed as I jumped in, clinging onto my body, but immediately left and floated atop.
200m freestyle.
It's two times, back and forth, down the 50 meters pool. I hurriedly gave chase after Matsumae-chan. The gap between us never increased, but it

wasn't shrinking. I twirled my body around at the first turn, kicking off the wall. There was a stinging pain beneath my feet.
It seemed she wasn't used to turning around, so the gap had shortened a little.
100m. 150m.
I stroked through the water, moving my feet.
Once the last turn ended, I was shoulder to shoulder with her.
It hurt. My body was yearning for oxygen. I was not giving way in the slightest.
I said I was going all out, but I never expected myself to be this serious. It's because I was serious that I wanted to win.
I could see the end. Another 15, no, 10 meters.
We're neck and neck. The result wasn't obvious.
I took a larger gasp of air, and began to sprint, reaching my hand out with utmost effort. At that moment, I met Matsumate-chan in the eyes while we were both in the water. No, we were looking at each other. She had noticed that there were others swimming in the pool.
That alone called Matsumae-chan to become that old weak-willed girl.
"Goal!"
Miya called out.
I lifted my head from the water, removed the cap and goggles. The yellow light of the ceiling was swirling in my eyes.
I was the one who won, but I didn't feel like I won.
She definitely let up at that last moment.

I climbed out of the pool, and before I could catch my breath, I lowered my head to Matsumae-chan in apology.
"Sorry."
As I had just apologized to my junior, Miya panicked, not knowing what to do. It seemed my intent had reached Matsumae-chan however, who too apologized to me.
"Don't say that. I should be the one apologizing."
Large water droplets fell from our hair, forming black spots on the poolside. We maintained the same position the entire time, and the water dropped at the same places. The black spots were expanding, just like my feelings.
I was ashamed, and furious. Of course, I was furious at Matsumae-chan for giving leeway at the end, but I was more furious at myself for forcing my junior to do such a thing. It was horrible of me.
So after a while, I lifted my head, saying,
"Give me a week. We'll race again."
"Eh? Eh? But senpai, you're preparing for the exams, right? It's less than a month until the second phase…"
Miya was the only one panicking away.
"Please."
"I could only lower my head again."

This time however, I could not order her, since I was the one asking.
I didn't know how long it took.
Probably not more than a minute.
"Please lift your head."
I did as Matsumae-chan said, lifted my head, and looked up at her.
"I should be the one asking of you."
Matsumae-chan looked a little sad as she lowered her head, and this rekindled my passion.

In any case, I reworked on my muscle training.
It's the time when students were free to report to school as and when they wanted to, so on that morning, I went to the pool.
It seemed uncle was worried this would affect my exams.
"Didn't you say you're going to go all out? There's no way you can focus in this situation."
He grimaced as he handed over the locker key. Of course, even without his reminder, I would prioritize my studies, and never forgot to take care of my long hair ever since I left the club.
Takuma once said Haru liked girls with long hair.
I didn't want to lose in any way, whether it's sports, exams, or love.
And just like that, a week passed.
I had a proper nap that morning, just as I had planned, and slept for almost 12 hours.
I had mom make fried pork cutlet for lunch, had two additional servings of rice, and went to school.
During this period, the third year classrooms were only about a third filled.
The third floor was unlike the noisy first and second floors, and one could sense the tense atmosphere in the room.
On this day, I saw that the person usually sitting before Haru hadn't arrived, and took that seat.
"Morning Haru."
"It's not morning anymore. It's afternoon, Akane."
"Hey, you're being too nitpicky, Haru."
"I think you're just too lax about it."
Haru answered without looking away from the book of English words. Hmm, he's a boy, but why did he have longer eyelashes than me? I stared at the face of the one I liked. Ahh, he yawned. It's a little ugly, but my feelings didn't falter.
"Are you sleepy?"
"A little. What about you, Akane? You look a little busy recently."
"I'm fine today. Had a nice sleep."
Haru finally lifted his head. He stared right at me.
It was too sudden, and I was shocked.
"Wh-what is it?"

"Do your best."
"...You know what I'm doing?"
"Nope. But you haven't said anything, Akane, so that means I don't have to you."

"Why say that?'
"Well, we have known each other for so long, I just got a feeling that you intend to do something on this day. You said that you're a simple person, just a single line can get you to work hard. That's why I say this. This is all I can do after all."
Haru smiled at me gently.
My chest was burning.
He saw all of my hard work, and was willing to cheer me on.
Most importantly, I was glad he remembered the summer day I fell for Haru.
This made me a little greedy, so I pestered him to say the same words again.
"...One more time."
"Do your best."
"One~ more time." "Do your best. Do your best, Akane."
"Yep, leave it to me."
I slammed my chest.
Yep.
With Haru cheering me on, I won't lose. Wasn't that always the case?
A girl in love is always invincible.

There were few people at the pool on this day, either because it's evening, or it's winter. There's only two grannies I knew of wading through the pool, chatting away. I watched them as I did my usual warm up, starting from my arms, shoulders, neck and waist, to my thighs and ankles. I twisted and bent various parts of my body. This caused my blood to boil in anticipation.
It's still not enough. Just wait a little more. So I suppressed my feelings.
"Good work."
Miya noticed me, and went to the poolside. The water droplets fell down her bodyline to the floor, the black footprints far away starting to dry and disappear.
"Sorry to make you drop me."
"Don't worry. I'm a fan of yours, senpai. Just tell me what you need."
This junior of mine's terrifyingly cute, and I patted her on the shoulder.
Seriously, these words were embarrassing even for me.
"How's the situation?"
"Think I'm back to form. Guess I can move well."
I poked the water surface with my toe. A ripple spread from where I touched.

The ripple spread at regular intervals, forming a ring, and vanishing. Once it vanished, I turned to the girl standing behind Miya, greeting her.
"Yo, Matsumae-chan."
Like usual, she was giving a stiff look. And she did not seem to be any more confident than usual.
The only thing different was that she never averted my eyes, and looked right back at me.
"Well, I joined the swimming club because I admire you, Rindou-senpai."
"Yep. I know."
I nodded unabashedly. There's always a few of these people who joined the club, and I had always answered their wishes. This had been the case all the time, so this time, I intended to do the same.
"Sorry to disappoint you the last time."
I deliberately spoke in a definite tone,
"But today's different. Relax. I'm amazing today. You don't have to worry. I'm going to show you that you admired the right person."
Smile.
Smile confidently.
Be filled with confidence, just as you faced the opponents at the Nationals/
I stood on the slightly wet starting block.
My blood was still cold.
Not yet.
Not yet.
Not yet, just a little more.
"Ready!"
Miya's voice rang, and it echoed just like that day, dispersing away.
Not yet.
Not yet.
Not yet.
"Start!"
At that moment, Miya's voice rang along with Haru's voice in my mind. "Do your best, Akane."
Now!
The circuits in my mind were opened at once.
My blood boiled immediately.
I started off at the perfect moment.

After that−
We gathered at an okonomiyaki store near Aria, and ordered the 'traditional club set'. It was a customary moment for us. Sauce and mayonnaise added onto the batter with lots of pork, beef and seafood, and a fragrance came along with the sizzling sound Ahh, it's great.
I munched down the okonomiyaki in large mouthfuls, while Matsumae-chan, who actually ordered an extra large portion, ate more than me. Miya's the only one who trained normally, and ordered pork.

"Got to hand it to you there, senpai."
I won, overwhelmingly. There was about a 10 meters gap.
"It's okay, I guess."
Matsumae-chan kept moving her chopsticks. She continued to eat and chew, and began to chomp on the next mouthful before she was done swallowing. She chewed, chewed, chewed, drinking water from time to time, and chewed. It felt as though she refused to talk to us.
Surely she could not accept this outcome.
She couldn't accept the fact that she lost despite going all out, and the first time she felt regret.
So I felt this was fine. Ah, I finally got some reward for my hard work this week.
I could accept it, but Miya probably couldn't. She sighed, grabbed the back of Matsumae-chan's head, which startled her. Then—
Both of them lowered their heads in unison.
Matsumae-chan's mouth was still stuffed with okonomiyaki, a spatula in one hand and chopsticks in the other as she blinked in shock, looking a little stunned.
"Thank you for the lesson."
Miya said, and lifted her head. Having known me for so long, it seemed she understood my intent.
I guess it's not easy trying to act cool.
"I don't know what you're talking about."
But I played dumb, like a certain person in the past, stuffing the cut okonomiyaki into my mouth.
Miya didn't say anything more.

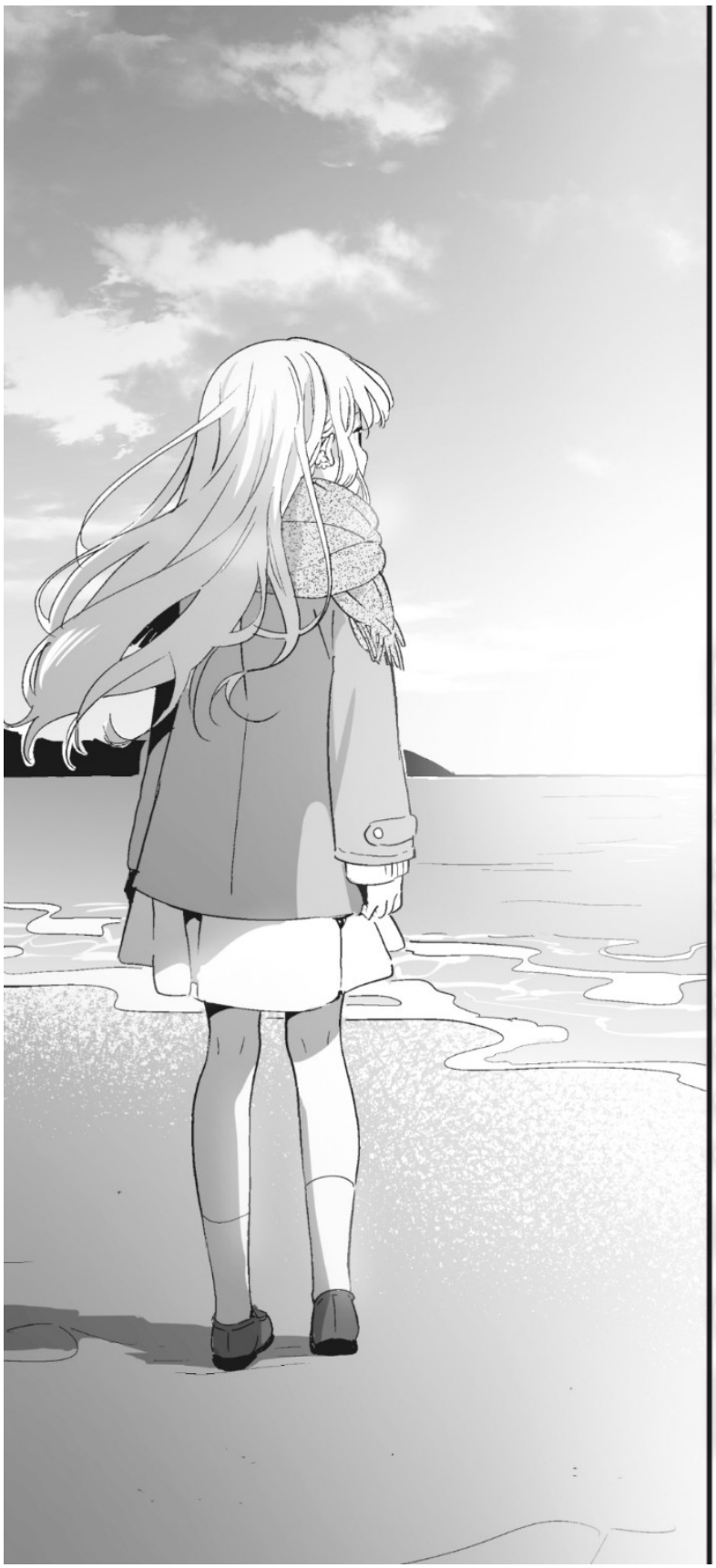
I went to swim on this day, partially for Matsumae-chan's sake. But I had to really emphasize that part of it was for my own sake, to swim for myself...it's true.
If Matsumae-chan just loved swimming and never intended to compete, I wouldn't have needed to do this. But I knew this wasn't the case.
When I first stood next to her, I mistook her purpose. She joined because she admired me however, and was the tolerant type who would compete just to gauge herself against others.
She's lonely, but not remotely arrogant to begin with.
In that case, it's only a matter of time until she joined the competitive side (ours). If I let her be, she would quit the club activities and swimming in a short time.
This contest might have hardened her resolve.
People are content as long as they have approached their goals to a certain extent. Matsumae-chan was content with nearly beating me a week ago, on that day, at that moment, but she didn't want that to happen, so she subconsciously slowed down, resulting in that outcome.

I could understand how she felt.
Training's difficult.
If she wanted to work hard, she needed something to support herself.
Like, to approach someone she admired, or to win a competition.
Or to have a crush cheer for oneself.
People can continue to progress just like this. I had personally experienced this.
All I did on this day was to create an opportunity for her.
The goal she admired was still far away, and she had to work hard to catch up.
She had to go further and beyond.
It was the goal a middle school boy once had for a girl.
And as a senior, I too entrusted the same wishes to my junior.

I bade farewell to the other two in front of the okonomiyaki shop.
The sun had set, but I didn't want to go home right away, so I went in the direction of the train station.
To be honest, I had been lost the entire time.
I wanted to tell Haru what happened.
But was it fine telling Haru when he didn't know what's going on? But but, it should be fine if I just told him, I did my best, right? But but but, if he's still studying, it's not good to distract him.
My mind was in a mess.
My heart was filled with much conflict as I continued walking. There were the yellow lights of the beef bowl restaurant chain, the high school students gathered at the parking lots of the convenience stores while on the way home, the crowds packed outside the windows of the burger shop.
I grabbed the lime green phone in my hand firmly, and walked for another 30 minutes or so.
I'm an indecisive maiden hopelessly in love—that's how it is, y-you got a problem—so after much frustration, I made up my mind.
Argh, I really wasn't being myself. Over the entire time, I had been opening and closing the contact list, finding the name I was thinking of.
"Haruyoshi Segawa."
It was the name of the only special person to me on this world. Whenever I touched his name, my heart would race. I switched the switch, and called out an eleven digit number. One click, Haru and I would be connected.
Well, here I go.
My heart was racing as I made the call, but nobody picked up, and all I could hear was the droning tone ringing away. It felt like a pity, but I was seemingly relieved.
What was the conflict in my heart about? Eh, but I couldn't do anything when he didn't pick up.

The feelings I could not vent were resolved, and I felt a lot better. Hm, better report to mom.
I would have her cook my favorite curry. There was a curry smell from somewhere, and though I had just eaten okonomiyaki, my mouth was filled with curry flavor. Curry~curry~if there's still some of that pork cutlet, let's have pork curry, so I hummed to myself for some reason.
I was feeling really good.
But the cruel world showed me reality.
I stopped once I saw a silhouette.
Even amongst dozens of people, I could spot him immediately. Yes, this too was the case.
Haru was there, but he wasn't alone.
He was together with the prettiest girl I saw.
That girl had the flowing long hair Haru liked.
She pretended to be pouty as she spoke to Haru, who might have been pretending before her as he clapped his hands together in apology. The girl continued to frown, but her pouting lips broke into a smile. They were smiling. Yep, they looked really happy.
It's like they were in a miracle. There was something I hoped for.
I didn't know at all; that Haru had this side to him.
I felt tragic, like someone dosed me with cold water from above. My heart was sad and angry.
Lots of complex emotions were mixed together, and I couldn't eke out a voice. Ah, but despite that, I should be able to make it in time. As long as I did something, my hands and my voice should be able to reach Haru.
I placed my hands on my chest pocket.
It contained the 'special photo' (my smile) Haru took this autumn, and that photo was throbbed violently. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.
I made up my mind, and changed directions.
They arrived at the station, said a few words, and went their separate ways.
Haru and the girl.
Who should I follow?
My body instinctively told me the answer. I hastened my steps, reached my hand out, and spoke to that person.
"Who are you?"
She was shocked, and glared back, just as I did.
And then, that girl and I had our only conversation.
But that was enough.
We fell for the same boy, neither of us would give way.
It was a competition beyond the scale I had against Matsumae-chan.
Yeah, that's right.
We couldn't understand each other, and couldn't get along with each other.
There's one thing that we both understood, that we were sworn enemies.
My love rival had a name as pretty as her appearance—
It sounded like the white sparkles descending from the sky.

Contact 162 - The Encounter a Year Ago



一年前の出来事

Contact.162

“Hey, you there—”
Two days ago I heard a cold voice, and looked over, seeing a girl with a touching smile.
This might be the most ordinary of all encounters. She’s not a girl who fell from the sky, and it’s not a body swap. She merely talked to me. I stopped.
Ah, yes. It’s the start of an ordinary encounter between the girl (her), and the ordinary boy (me).

“I really want him to bring me to the seaside.”
I heard her mutter with the same warmth as she did that day, and turned to look at her. She was enthusiastically picking away at the pebbles by the riverbank. “This shape is a little…” “this one’s a little too big.” So she picked the pebbles and tossed them out. Her posture the entire time encapsulated the term serious.
As she continued to remain crouched, I looked towards her, and called out the name I knew days ago.
“Yuki.”
“Hm~? What is it?”
“Did I mishear that just now?”
“Just now?”
"I heard you say you want to go to the seaside."
"I think you definitely heard that wrong."
Let's use this, so Yuki nodded as she slowly got to her feet.
She was holding a small round pebble in her little hand.
With a really pretty form, she threw the pebble along the surface. It formed ripples on the water surface, once, twice, thrice, as it spun away.
Ta ta tatatatatatatata.
It bounced eight times in total, and finally sank slowly to the bottom.
Yuki said she never played stone skipping, and I was teaching her. It was a little vexing how she broke my best record on her first try.
“I said I want you to bring me to the seaside.”
Yuki finally turned towards me. The gleeful grin of succeeding at stone skipping diluted the mature vibe she had.
“Can I ask something?”
I raised my hand, and Yuki leisurely turned her palm towards me,
“Sure.”
“What month is it now?”
“February.”
In other words, it’s Winter.
We were shivering away in the frigid, blade-like winds.
The river was flowing before our eyes, dyed in the grey color of the sky, looking a little forlorn. The leisurely breezes blew by, causing ripples, headed towards us, pressing our uniforms down onto our chests.
It seemed Yuki wanted to go to a colder place in such weather.

“It’s Winter. Cold.”
Left with no choice, I could only say this.
“It’s fine, let’s go.”
“How about Summer? We think of the sea when it comes to Summer.”
“No, now is fine.”
“You’re really stubborn. We can’t go into the water when it’s winter, you know?”
“The feet alone should be fine.”
"Seriously, I think the cold's unbearable. Besides, you're scared of the cold anyway, Yuki."
"Eh, how did you know?"
At that moment, there was a glint in Yuki's large eyes, the glint small yet dazzling, ostensibly about to vanish on a single puff.
"Anyone can tell when you're dressed in such thick clothing."
Yuki's dressed in a turtleneck coat, and the scarf was wrapped around her neck a few times. Beneath the coat wasn't a sailor uniform, but a sweater. Also, she had her hands hidden inside the sleeves for protection against the cold. Whenever I saw the cute fingertips appear, I had to suppress my excitement with all I had. I actually like overly long sleeves, but there's no way I can say that.
"Yoshi-kun, you're giving a scary look."
"You're lying."
I patted my face.
“You’re thinking of something pervy, aren’t you?”
“Not at all. No, I’m saying that I’m not thinking, of anything, at all.”
“Really~?”
Yuki narrowed her eyes, which were devoid of that glint from before. She called my name, her eyes giving a different look.
Argh. I had what could only be described as a bad feeling.
“Hey, Ha, ru, yo, shi, Se ga, wa, kun.”
“Wh-what?”
Yuki took a step that was two steps long.
The gentle fragrance entered my nose, and the first thing I saw was her reddened nose, followed by her blushing face, red as an apple, a stark contrast to her white skin. Then, I saw her somewhat dry lips, on the verge of bleeding anytime soon.
My head went white, and I reached my fingers towards her lips, only to stop. That’s not a place I could casually touch.
But, why?
Why did I reach my hand out?
The hand was dangling in the air, having lost its aim, wrapped up by something soft. It’s something as cold as my hand, a certain person’s hand. Yet there was warmth from where I touched, and some pain.
She grinned away, repeating,
“Bring me to the seaside.”

Shall we get back to that topic? Her wordless smile was conveying this intent.
Now what do you expect me to do?
Well, the answer's obvious.
"As you wish."
Was there any other option to begin with?
This happened in winter, during my second year of high school.
And just like that, Yuki Shiina and I decided to go to the seaside.

The town I lived in was completely landlocked amongst the mountains, and a trip to the seaside would require a train ride, or a bus. I checked the place Yuki wanted to visit, and discovered it would take almost four hours to reach there. One could say it's a little trip by itself.
"I still can't see the sea."
We were shaking in the train for at least three hours. Yuki duly commented as she sat by the window, but the impression she gave was different from what she said. She seemed really happy.
"Sea, sea, see the sea~" She hummed a tune I had never heard, probably something she made up, "Sea, sea, see the sea~" Seemed like she's in a good mood.
There's a hard cover book on her knees, and a pink bookmark stuck in the middle of that book. It's completely pink, and while it's commonplace, she seemed to have really treasured it. For some reason, I was very curious about this.
"What is it?"
Yuki noticed my stare, and tilted her head in confusion. But naturally, I didn't have the courage to ask her about that—
"It's nothing. Is that book interesting?"
And I could only pass it off with an unrelated topic.
"Sort of, but I think I got some motion sickness, so I'm not reading it. Let's have some snacks."
And as she said, she put the book into the bag, taking out an ordinary bento box commonly found in a convenience store, taking out some roasted snacks. She popped them into her mouth with a blissful look, and enjoyed it well.
The train soon fell into darkness, the scenery outside swallowed in darkness —not that the sky turned dark, but that the train entered the tunnel. It continued to push forward, seeking the light.
Suddenly, Yuki pointed the skewer tip of the snacks at me, asking,
"Beyond the tunnel is—"
The answer appeared in my mind even though I wasn't thinking of it. It happened as naturally as '1+1=2'. After all, it's the slogan of the most famous anime movie in Japan.
"A mysterious town beyond the tunnel, is it?"
"Yes. Now that, what might await us there?"

The moment we finished saying so, the light filled our eyes.
The light shone through the glass, turning rectangular, adding charm to Yuki's white skin. She narrowed her eyes because it was too bright, and smiled.
Our destination, the place Yuki was looking forward to, was beyond the window. Wahh, wahh, she squealed like a kid. I took the opportunity to take a munch off the snack pointed at my nose. Hm, enough saltiness.
"Wahh□Eh? Ah, ahhhh…"
Yuki realized I was eating her snack because of my chewing, looked at the snack in her hand, and exclaimed,
"Yoshi-kun, what did you just do!!"
She's not expressing her emotions correctly, and it's obvious how agitated she was.
She nimbly switched between two different emotions. Delight because she saw the vast scenery outside the window; sadness because her snack got eaten.
"Waaahhhhh!!!"
This is joy.
"Ah, ahhhh…"
This is sadness.
Yuki's reaction could muster the guilt within anyone's heart, so I couldn't help but divert my attention out of the window..
I could see the thick clouds in the distant skies. A beam of light shone through the clouds. I remembered it was called 'Angel's Ladder' or something. The light caused the water surface beneath it to whiten and dazzle.
Speaking of which, it's the first time I saw the sea during winter. After all, I never went out of my way to do so. I realized I was acting a little emotional, and covered my smiling lips with my hand. Goodness me, I said I didn't want to go, but my body was being so honest.
"Waahh, the sea's so pretty. Ah, ahh, this snack's limited for the period. I can't buy it anymore."
But as Yuki next to me let out an unexpectedly dejected sigh, I could only apologize to her.

We alighted at an empty station, and boarded a bus that so happened to arrive.
After another half an hour on the bus, an empty beach appeared before our eyes. Before we walked to the sea, I had a look at the bus schedule. It seemed the last bus would arrive at 7pm.
"Hm~feels like the sea. There's the smell of the tide□"
A few months ago, or rather, a few months later, it would be a completely different season, and this place would be full of people. Right now, it's a place belonging only to Yuki and me.
"I guess."

Yuki stretched as she strolled down the beach, while I remained still, watching her back.
She made it halfway between me and the sea, and removed her boots and socks, walking barefooted on the beach. The porcelain-like white feet caused my heart to jolt.
She moved her hand away from her waist, and the boots fell into the sand with a thud. Like a bird, she stretched her empty hands, but she did not fly away. She walked to the sea.
The surging waves splashed at her feet, and her footprints were swallowed, as though her stroll had never happened. I had a feeling the white waves wanted to take Yuki away. Her feet was completely buried in the water.
Run! The wind prompted me from behind. Once I took the first step, the second step was easier. Three steps, four, I accelerated, and ran towards where she was.
I got to Yuki, and she turned towards me.
“Eh,Yoshi-kun, what is it?”
“I don’t know.”
“Don’t know what?”
“I don’t know why I suddenly thought of running.”
“What was that?” Yuki seemed bemused by that “That’s weird of you.”
The cold wind blew between us.
“It is.”
The words I said was lofted by the wind to a faraway place. We looked towards the direction of the voice, and a second or two passed, before the distant grey clouds were the only things left behind.
“…Hm, let’s get moving.”
Yuki suddenly declared as she rolled up her sleeves vigorously, scooping the seawater with her palms, and grinned away. I didn’t bother asking her what she was planning to do, and I all could do was to coax her,
“Yuki, don’t be crazy now.”
“I’m not, watch this!”
Yuki wouldn’t liste, and splashed water at me.
The water danced in the air, dazzling as it reflected the light. I scooted away in a panic, evading the frontal assault.
“Woah, what are you doing?”
“What do you mean? This is something we should do at the seaside.”
“It’s cold.”
“I know. Say, it really is. It’s freezing me to death.”
“You didn’t have to do tha.t”
“But we finally made it all the way here.”
“But you didn’t have to drag me into this—ahh!”
Yuki splashed water at me again while I was talking, and I couldn’t dodge in time as I was ambushed. The water splashed onto my face, and it hurt a little. Felt like something melted too. I abandoned all caution thereafter, and removed my shoes and socks as Yuki did, stepped into the water. My

knees were soaked, along with part of my shorts, but I guessed I didn't care at that point
The chill rising from beneath my feet caused me to shiver, my teeth clattering away. I wasn't just cold, I was in pain. Even so—
I scooped the seawater with my palm, and splashed it at Yuki.
"Kyaa, what are you doing!?." The water hit her skirt, turning it a little black. The droplets were also black.
I burst out laughing, "Don't splash on others if you're not ready to get splashed."
"Oh? So that means you're ready to throw it down with me, Yoshi-kun?"
"Eh? Erm, Yuki, san? Isn't that, too much water?"
"Of course not."
"It's freezing. My clothes are soaked."
"Ahahahaha."
"Hey, this isn't a laughing matter. It's freezing man."
"What? It's supposed to be cold in the winter, right?"
"No, I should be blaming you more than the winter."
"Your fault for having poor aim."
"So it's all my fault?"
"Yes, it's all your fault, Yoshi-kun."
We yapped away happily, having fun as though we're abandoning everything, running away from reality.
We're the only two people at the seaside this winter. Yes, two of us. Not one.
That was why I could endure this freezing cold.

"What did we just do?"
"Who knows?"
"It's stupid."
"It really is."
We calmed down after having much fun, and regretted our actions. Our feet were soaked, and we couldn't move. We were soaked to our thighs, our clothes heavy like lead.
"Hm."
I held Yuki's outstretched hand, and we walked down the coast. Sand was stuck on my soles, and it hurt.. We left footprints on the beach, in the opposite direction from where we came from.
"We'll use the sand to build a castle later."
"Sure, a castle for Yoshi-kun and me."
"Feels a bit weird."
"Why? I'm the princess and you're the chancellor."
Yuki held my hand with hers, the other holding her boots.
"What, I'm the chancellor?"
"Yep. The chancellor who listens to all the selfish whims of the stubborn princess."

“Sounds troublesome.”
“You don’t want to?”
“Not exactly.”
Right. It’s not something really annoying.
I was happy to go along with Yuki’s wishes. It’s not like I had some weird characteristic. In fact, I didn’t…probably.
It’s just that, whatever I did, Yuki’s happy. Whenever I called for her, she would give a happy look. Even when I was summoned by her, I didn’t feel annoyed. I just felt happy to be thanked by her.
I guess it’s something like instinct.
The creatures called men have no resistance to the smiles of women, moreso if it’s a cute girl.
“That’s fine. Are you really okay with being the chancellor?”
“Didn’t you say so?”
“Well, I said it, but you can say that you don’t want to do it. Just say if there’s any other role you want to play as.”
“Other, as in?”
“Never mind. You don’t have to understand. What I said isn’t important. It’s something you have to notice and work hard to achieve.”
Yuki said as she let go of the hand. She then pointed at the stone steps with the bags placed there.
“I think we should rest. Brought some hot tea and snacks.”
“Can I eat those?”
“What do you mean?”
“No, I just got the feeling that you’ll react like you did on the train. Sounds troublesome.”
The moment I said so, Yuki puffed her cheeks.
“I didn’t pout. It was a limited edition, that’s why. You just ate a bit without saying anything. I prepared some snacks and drinks for now, so it’s fine. Or are you saying that you can’t eat what I bought?”
“Well, it feels like you’re drunk, Yuki, like you can’t drink my wine.”
“I’m not drunk.”
“Hahaha. That’s something a drunk will say.”
“Hmph. I’m ignoring you.”
Yuki pouted again, but as she returned to the stairs, she took out all the snacks, and felt a lot better. It seemed she’s not the type to be angry for long.
I felt the warmth and sweetness flow into my body. After I finished it all at once, Yuki asked if I wanted another cup, so I graciously requested for another.
I sniveled a little, sensing the warmth from my hands.
“Seems like this tea’s good for the body too.”
“I see. Oh yeah, Yuki.”
“Hm?”
“It’s warm. Very very warm.”

I put my warmed hands onto Yuki’s. She had been shivering the entire time, probably because she’s cold.
“My hands are still so cold.”
“Shall we keep it like this for now?”
Until you’re no longer cold. Until we share this warmth equally.
Yuki’s palms turned up, and this was her answer. But why was it that I was the one who suggested this, yet I couldn’t hold her hands? It’s embarrassing of me.
Yuki might have had enough, for she sternly pulled my hands and brought our palms together. The fingers were exerting lots of strength, and they were intertwined with mine. I gripped them back tentatively. After a long time, my fingers finally touched the back of her hands, and as I was embarrassed, I had my head lowered the entire time, never looking at Yuki’s pretty face.
The winter wind was really comfortable.
If only some of this suddenly rising body warmth could be shared with Yuki.
Once again, I looked towards the winter sea, thinking about such things.

The sun had set at the time we left the seaside. The thick clouds had parted slightly, and the stars could be seen as scattered lights in the sky.
We were the only two at the seaside for the entire day. Everything left there was proof that we were the only ones there, from the sandcastles to the hundreds of footprints to the words written with drifted branches. We hurried to the bus stop five minutes before it was time. All we had to do was to head back, take another 30 minutes to the train station, and another 3 hours ride back.
We sat at the faded, if not ugly looking seats of the bus stop. We were worn out, and were unable to say anything.
Five minutes later, the bus did not appear. "It's a little late." "Yeah", so we muttered, and waited for another ten. The bus did not appear.
Yuki got up reluctantly, checked the schedule, Yoshi-kun, and called my name in shock.
"Wh-what is it?"
"Did you check the schedule properly?"
"Of course."
...Yoshi-kun, may I know what is the date today?"
"Why the sudden keigo?"
"Just answer."
I had a bad feeling about this.
"Eh? Erm, 11th February."
"Can I ask another question?"
"Yeah?"
"What's the day today?"

Yuki's question had me confused? Was it a special day? It seemed Yuki sensed my lack of awareness, and she pointed at the schedule like a school teacher.
"Look here."
I did as told, and took a closer look. It was Saturday, and the last bus was noted to be at 7pm, as I remembered. Yuki then slid her fingers to the column regarding Sunday and public holidays. The last bus was 4pm.
She saw that I still did not get her, and revealed the correct answer,
"February 11th is the National Foundation Day, so it's a holiday."

"Really?"

"Yeah."
Yuki nodded.

I messed up. I never expected myself to make this mistake.
Was it because I was too excited? Well I was. It's a big deal for me to go out with a cute girl.
Yuki, walking next to me, didn't say a word. It was terrifying.
So we walked for another ten minutes or so, and returned to the convenience store we were at half an hour ago. Yuki then turned towards me, reaching her hand out,
"Yoshi-kun. The phone."
...Right! The phone!
There's that too. It's too simple, I didn't think about it. And in response to these revelation-like words, I hastily pulled the smartphone out from my pocket.
"Lend me."
"Eh? Why?"
"Just do it. You don't have the right to refuse me now."
Yuki's right. I didn't have that right. So I handed the phone over obediently, and she nodded, looking pleased. She then switched it off.
"...Why?"
"Why you ask? You would have gone back if you had this, Yoshi-kun. Like, call your dad, or a taxi."
That's what I intended. Yuki however gave a troubled look, as though I was the one asking a weird question. Was I the weird one? No no no, that's impossible. So she ignored this stunned me, and smiled,
"More importantly, let's buy dinner."
"Huh?"
"It's cold out here, so I want something hot. Like Oden."
"Huh?"
The automatic doors opened, and the warm air warmed many things. Yuki prompted me forward, pulling my hand into the shop.

The orange light looked comfortable, and like an insect attracted to the light, I wasn't able to resist as I stumbled into the shop.

After that.
Yuki left the convenience store, holding the plastic bag leisurely, and we returned to the seaside leisurely.
Nothing happened aside from a few vehicles passing through. The headlights turned Yuki yellow, her shadow swaying aside at a right angle.
Yuki never got to buy Oden. The uncle, probably the shopkeeper, told her to return the next day as they probably were sold out. She had an increased urge to eat once she knew she couldn't, and pestered the uncle about the next time the food would be available. It seemed the shop would close at 10, and there's no point demanding for unavailable things. We bought meat buns and fried chicken and the like, and left the store.
We walked down the stone steps of the dike, and descended to the coast. The sea at night was a lot quieter than the day. It's like the sounds of the waves were the only voices left in the world.
"Sorry for acting selfishly. I just wanted to stay outside with you a little longer."
"No it's fine. It's my fault to begin with. I should be the one apologizing."
"You don't have to. Leave that until we return home. Your family should be angry now, right?"
"Who knows? My family don't really care about that. They just close an eye if I stay out for too long."
"You'll get scolded."
"I'm not so sure about that."
"That'll definitely happen."
Yuki handed over the phone she confiscated.
"They're definitely worried about you, so I allow you to send a message. Say that you're with friends. Well, that makes you a liar, but you're good at that, aren't you?"
"I don't usually lie. How am I good at that?"
Of course, I couldn't say that I never lied before. This wasn't really a lie to begin with. Yuki and I were friends, and we were together.
"Really?"
"Really."
So she responded, looking completely skeptical. For some reason, I couldn't put a finger to it, but I took the phone, and found that my mom sent me a message.
"Are you coming back for dinner?"
I pondered a little, and lied as Yuki told me to. I'll be staying at a friend's place, I don't need dinner; so I responded. This kind of lie probably wouldn't amount to much. I pressed the send button, and my lie became a message sent hundreds of kilometers away. Got it, so mom replied.
"You don't have to contact anyone, Yuki?"

"Who?"
"Like, your parents?"
"...It's fine."
Yuki's voice was soft, and I couldn't determine the emotion she had. For some reason, I felt the girl next to me was as lonely as a lost kid, and the words she said just disappeared into the night air.
I saw the street light behind her slender shoulders. It's probably 5km from here, or 10; might be longer, but still walkable.
Once we walked there, there would be a hotel, and probably an internet cafe and karaoke. Despite that, Yuki was holding the hand warmer from the convenience store as she walked down the coast, and seemed to have no intention of going to a place with light. So, we continued walking in the darkness.
"Ah, look. It's pretty nice."
Yuki finally stopped before an empty looking beach lounge. There's no human presence to be sensed there. People probably only show up there in the summer.
The blue paint on the walls had been weathered away, but it appeared they could withstand the wind. There's no door, but there's a rest area at the back. If we cleared up the rubbish of empty cans and snacks here, we probably could spend the night here.
I found myself a little excited, just a little. It's a scenario every man had hoped for at least once. It's like we discovered a secret base.
While my emotions were running wild, Yuki turned the faucet at the back door, checking for water.
Girls really were lacking in the concept of romance, but if I said so, she would have refuted, saying that our definitions were different.
"The seawater's making my face and hands sticky. Won't feel good if I don't wash it off."
So Yuki said as she washed her face in the freezing weather, and I was impressed by that. I too washed my limbs and face, but not exactly thorough.
We finally entered the rest area, and ate the meat bun that was a little colder, fried chicken, and croquettes. We had the warmed corn tea, rested a little, and that thing showed up. The sleep demon opened its mouth wide, intending to swallow my consciousness. It's no doubt a demon, as powerful as a demon lord in video games.
My eyelids got heavy, and the world began to turn hazy.
No matter how I tried to endure, I couldn't stop yawning.
Despite that, I barely forced my way to a corner of the room, keeping my distance from Yuki. I was indicating that I wasn't planning to do anything to her in my own way, but−
Yuki's HP gauge was in the red, and she came to my side, bringing the thick blanket she had and draping it all over me. The world was swallowed in utter darkness, just like when evening turned to night.

My eyes immediately saw the crescent-like lips of Yuki, resembling the moon.
"Eh."
She snuck under the blanket with a squeal. The distance between us was not even a millimeter. Typically, I wouldn't notice my own breathing and heartbeat, but those sounds were ridiculously loud.
Also, I felt other things.
Yuki's warmth.
Yuki's softness.
Yuki's breathing.
She was giving off the usual smell of spring, and the senses shooed away my sleep demons, just a little.
"E-er-erm, Yuki-san?"
"...Is something the matter?"
For some reason, both of us were speaking in keigo.
"What's going on?"
"I-it's cold."
Yuki said as she buried her face into her thighs. Her usually white neck was obviously a little red, and her awkwardness too reached me.
I tried joking, or rather, if I didn't do so, I wouldn't last.
"Don't do this if you're going to be embarrassed."
"I-I-I'm not embarrassed. You are, Yoshi-kun."
"I can't help it. It's because you're a beauty, Yuki. No, erm."
Huh? What did I just blurt out? It was too late for me to retract my words though.
I didn't know if my eyes got used to the darkness, or other reasons, but I found Yuki's neck and years a lot redder than they were before. My mind emptied itself further as a result.
"Eh, erm, I didn't mean that. No, you're cute, Yuki, but what I want to say is, eh, how should I put it?"
"Uh huh?"
"So, yeah, I guess it's no wonder I'm like this. Yeah, not that I want to do something guilty."
Yuki lifted her head, still looking red as she stared at this anxious me.
"Hey, Yoshi-kun."
Yes!"
"Thanks. Because of you, I know all the efforts I put in have not gone to waste."
I thought she would be teasing me, but she thanked me for some reason.
"Efforts?"
"It's fine that you don't know about this. Hm, well. A swan can flap at the water all it wants, but it'll still look like it's just floating around. Boys just need to see girls doing that."
I didn't really get what she meant, but she probably meant that I shouldn't look deeper into this.

"Anyway, back on topic. Seriously, Yuki, I may look like this, but I'm a guy."
"I know."
"Don't you think this situation's a little bad?"
"Not exactly. Not at all."
"Why?"
"You're a good boy, Yoshi-kun. You say you'll be fine being a chancellor."
I recalled building sandcastles with Yuki during the day. She's a stubborn princess, and I was the chancellor fulfilling her wishes.
"But you know, if you keep being one, you won't be able to fulfill a princess' biggest wish. A princess is always waiting for a prince."
So she said, and closed her eyes, leaning her head on her shoulder. A few seconds after I froze, she made a cute snoring sound. Typically, I wouldn't be able to sleep in such circumstances, but because of the body warmth and the snoring, the distant sleep demons approached once again. My eyelids were twice as heavy as before, and my consciousness was quickly fading. Everything was becoming empty, the rational mind and self-awareness to control myself weakened, and my desire couldn't have missed out on this chance.
Sheepishly, I held Yuki's hand firmly as she slept. And then, I fell asleep, satiated.
❀
I had a dream.
In that dream, I was four, or five, in kindergarten.
I experienced this dream many times, and even in the dream, I knew it was one.
However, the dream world could only repeat the past over and over again, and the same ending happened every time, so it probably was the same this time. I was only able to observe the developments as a bystander and a first person.
Two friends were talking to me. I couldn't remember their names and appearances. However, I could remember their voices. One of them often hung out with me, and the other was one I was on better terms with recently. They had high pitches, their voices prepubescent.
One of them said that we should go play soccer. Another said we should go catch some rhino beetles.
I actually preferred the latter, but if I did, the friend I was closer to would be angry. If I played soccer, I would have made the newer friend sad. This current me would probably have dealt with it better, but I couldn't do so back then.
So I chose to remain silent.
Right. I chose neither.
And the dream ended. I chose neither, and didn't grab anything before it ended.
But this dream was different.
There was a pretty girl I had never met. She reached her hand towards me.

For some reason, the moment I saw that new girl, I felt nothing else mattered. Not the soccer, not the rhino beetle, not the friends whose names I forgot.
The only important thing was the girl before me.
In this dream, I reached my hand out, and called the name I couldn't have known of.
"Yu−"
I didn't know if my voice reached her.
❀
I woke up in the morning, and felt my body ache.
I moved my shoulders, which creaked away. I had been sleeping on the hard floor, my buttocks and neck aching away. My fatigue never faded away, and I couldn't see very well.
After rubbing my eyes a few times, the world finally got clearer.
Only then did I realize Yuki was not around.
There was a void next to me, some warmth, and Yuki's presence had vanished like snowflakes.
Some fear struck me, griping at my heart.
Suddenly, I recalled her silhouette as she stood at the seaside. The waves continued to reach its white, thin arms reaching for her feet. The unspeakable unease drove me out of the rest room.
A gust of cold wind suddenly struck my skin, bringing the cold into my body.
It was a winter morning.
Actually, was it morning? The world's still dark, some white by the hill. It's a divide between night and day. Morning was about to start.
The sun was slowly appearing in the sky, spreading its wings like a swan. Everything was engulfed in light, including her who had vanished next to me.
As expected, she was kneeling by the sea. For some reason, she had the pink bookmark she treasured in her hand, holding down the bottom with her fingers as she stared at the ending night. She was dazzling in the glimmer of the dawn.
That sight had me thoroughly mesmerized, captivated like a fool.
She then noticed me, lifted her head to say something, but because of the distance between us, I couldn't hear too well. All I could make out was a grunt from her as she got up, and her calling my name.
It was the most beautiful scene I had ever seen. This time, I called her name in reality. She ran over to me.
"Good morning, Yuki."
Just calling out this name had my heart in pain.
I was wondering what this first experience of an emotion was, one so painful and yet unable to let go of, so terrifying yet so warm. I couldn't help but conclude that, yes−
It might be the first time I had fallen in love.

On our trip back, we bought lots of Oden at the convenience store, as revenge for missing out the previous day.
Large carrots, eggs, beef tendon skewers, and most importantly, the cabbage roll, thick fried tofu, and kinchaku mochi. There were only two cabbage rolls, and Yuki squealed in exaggeration.
Since we got the chance, we went to the seaside for the third time.
We sat on the dike, took out the Oden, and the moment we opened the lid, the hot air and smell inside caused our stomachs to rumble.
"Let's eat."
"Yep, let's."
Itadakimasu, we said, and enjoyed the boiling food and broth. The pepper was overwhelming, causing our eyes to water, but despite that—
"It's really nice."
"Yeah, it really is."
"I told you we should have bought the cabbage roll."

"This might be the best cabbage roll I've ever eaten."
"That might be an exaggeration."
"It's not. It's really great."
I took the slightly large cabbage roll, and popped it into my mouth. The meat taste spread in my mouth, and the broth sipping out was really delicious, causing me to chew away.
"I'm so happy."
Yuki put down her chopsticks, muttering. I was not done swallowing the cabbage roll in my mouth.
"I feel a little lonely. The sandcastles, the words we wrote with sticks, everything today and yesterday will vanish."
"…They won't."
"Eh?"
I swallowed the cabbage roll, and said again,
"Even if we do vanish now, something definitely will remain behind."
"Like?"
"Eh, I don't know."
I didn't know what would be left behind—
"You aren't serious about this."
"Ugh, sorry."
But I really was thinking that.
"Whatever." Yuki nodded, "This is fine. If only something is left behind, but such a miracle can't possibly happen."
"What do you mean?"
Yuki merely gave a dumbfounded smile. For some reason, she seemed to be holding back her tears, and once I pointed that out,
"The mustard's too strong."
She lied, shaking her slender legs like a kid.

Once the Oden cup in my hands was empty, Yuki said,
"Actually, I,"
I had a feeling she wanted this opportunity to talk. Her hair was ruffled by the wind, and she pulled it behind her ears,
"Wanted to meet again."
"With who?"
"Umi?"
"I don't think people actually 'meet' the sea?"

Yuki didn't look at me, Ah yes, people usually don't understand, and muttered,
"Actually, this Umi I'm talking about refers to my little sister."
"Your little sister? Is she born in the summer?"
"Why you ask?"
"No, well, if you say sea, like Umi, it gives the impression of summer."
Yuki shook her head.
"She's born in the winter. I think it's because I said I wanted to see the sea soon before Umi was born."
"Just because of that?"
"Haha. Yes. So later, papa brought me along with mama who was pregnant to the sea. To be honest, I didn't really remember what happened that day, but even today, I can remember it was snowing on the sea. We saw the winter sea on a snowy day colder than it is today. It's so dark, so lonely, but so pretty and captivating. It's like my heart was captured."
Yuki's sidelong face looked so sad and grim, her eyes seemingly looking into the distance. Not at the vast seas, not at the islands afar, not the tetrapods, or the beach lounge we stayed at last night.
Yuki might have been looking at something more distant, something beautiful the naked eye couldn't see.
"The snow and sea appearing together becomes a magical sight. Papa probably named her Umi hoping that we would be such sisters. Umi's innocent and honest, a very cute girl. Back then, I had fun being together with Umi."
This tone had me a little curious,
"Back then?"
"It's been a while since I saw her. She went somewhere far. It's been a while since we met."
"Feeling lonely?"
"Very. But it's fine. I believe it's only a matter of time until we meet. I just need to do what I have to, and once it all ends, I'll be able to meet her again. Right now, I'm just waiting."
Yuki looked painful when she said these words, and didn't look like she was enduring.
But I couldn't tell her to just meet her that easily. Such was the grimness in her expression.

"The sea's really pretty."
That was the only thing I could say."
"For sure. It really is."
"Yep, very pretty."
The winter sea was so dark, so lonely, so scary. Yet I was mesmerized by the light shining through the gaps of the clouds, the waves of the seas, and the vastness of the horizon stretching into the distance. I really found the sea to be pretty.
It didn't matter whether it's the sea before me, or the girl whose name sounded the same. I never saw her, but I could be sure, for I felt that the girl sitting next to me was an existence prettier than anything else.
"Let's see the sea in winter again. A snowy day."
My words finally had Yuki looking at me. She first gave a look of shock, and then a teary look. Finally, she showed a smile,
"You're a liar after all, Yoshi-kun."
Despite that, her expression was full of sadness.
I didn't know if the future me could wipe away all her sadness.
❄
A crisp sound echoed on the night streets.
It was the alarm signalling the end of the dream, and also, what sounded like applause to conclude the end of a fairy tale.
The clapping girl looked at her aching palms, seemingly lamenting the thing that were once upon them, yet no longer existing.
The past the girl recalled was that particular thing. It was ethereal like a dream, fleeting like a fairy tale, a thing that would melt and vanish, just as her name would imply.
Ahh, but despite that—
The fragment of that dazzling world remained in the girl's heart. Something did remain, just as the boy had said that day.
The girl blushed when she was told that she was cute.
She pretended to be nonchalant, and shared the same blanket with the boy, even though she was so nervous, her heart was about to pop.
Thanks to that, she woke up earlier than the boy, and got to see his sleeping face. His eyebrows were long, his sleeping face somewhat resembling a kid's.
And most importantly, the boy was holding the girl's hand while sleeping.
Was there anything more blissful?
At this point, she could admit the feelings she had for the boy after 4 years, and the things she didn't want to admit.
About him, I—

"Hey, Yoshi-kun. Thank you for finding me."

The girl's mutter vanished like the snow, never reaching his ears. She hurried towards his house.
The right hand was holding the very sweet 'promise' between the duo, though a little bitter.
The left hand was holding the girl's pink 'wish' they had both looked up at.
She held these two things firmly, not allowing them to fall.
The night of February 14th ended.
The story no one knew of ended, and a new story began.
But despite that, so the boy (said) spoke up, and the girl (watashi) said.

It was the happiest love story in the world that belonged nowhere, but truly existed.

Contact 214 + 1 - The Place We Arrived At

Contact.

214+1

"Hey, what are you doing?"
I called out to a boy I knew not of.
I was strolling around to a nearby park, and saw a little silhouette running there for who knew how long.
It's probably an elementary school kid. A small body, slender limbs, pretty face, grim looking the entire time.
The sweat on the kid fell like tears, and the kid wiped it off with the jumper sleeves. The sweat danced in the air, giving an orange glow, becoming increasingly dazzling. What hurt me most however was the sidelong face of a person working really hard, unhappy and unwilling to compromise.
That reminded me of a certain person.
That person was more mature than the boy before him, but was still a child.
That person kept wouldn't give up, and kept running—
Struggling towards a place that existed nowhere.
The sweat stung the kid’s eyes, but as the blue skies of summer were too vibrant, even the tears were dried away. I could vividly remember that scene just by closing my eyes . I recalled what transpired on that hottest day of summer, when I quietly swore that I would never forget what happened on that day.
The sun that day was vicious.
The scent of the dirt was overwhelming.
The sweat continued to fall. It was really salty..
For a while now, the kid had been repeating the actions of a certain person. His fingers were on the ground, and he was looking forward, adjusting his breathing, and sprinted off. Right when he was about to accelerate, he slowed down, and returned to his old posture. This happened over and over again.
It seemed he was focused on practicing his starts, and my voice never reached him. I got up from the bench, and took a large breath of the spring evening air. The sakuras had yet to bloom, but I could have sworn I smelled that.
“Hey, what are you doing?
I then called out with a voice much louder than before.
The kid was startled, tumbled over, and looked up at me.
“Eh?”
The sweat fell down his forehead. The wind blew. And the long hair covering his large eyes fluttered along.
My silhouette got bigger in the black eyes resembling a starless night, and was obviously distinct with the ambiguous world, a proof that I, a part of the background just a moment ago, had entered his world. Just like that, an encounter was made, and a relationship was formed.
“Hi there. I’m Segawa Haruyoshi.”
I greeted the kid.
“Huh? E-erm, are you as-asking…er, me?”

The kid tilted his kid in confusion, and I nodded in confirmation. He then answered me.
“He-hello there, I’m Haruto.”
It happened during the spring near the end of my university life.
And just like that, I made an elementary school acquaintance.

“Well, that happened yesterday.”
“Can I open the window?”
“Sure.”
Takuma, seated in the co-driver seat, then pulled down the car window. The spring air was still a little cold, purging away the warm air inside, even blowing back Takuma’s bangs.
“This breeze sure feels good.”
This buddy of mine said with his face by the window, humming the tune of an idol song. It’s a love song signaling the start of spring.
“It’s spring now.”
“I know your name man. How long have we been friends to begin with?”
“Enough with that dumb act man. Were you listening to me anyway?”
“I am, I am. So you spoke to that pretty kid, and got a tea session with the police, right?”
“Who said that?”
It seemed he had no interest in my encounter with the kid.
I borrowed my dad’s car half an hour ago, and went to fetch my high school friend from the train station.
The local station was already empty, and that tall friend of mine walked out. It’s been a while since we met, but I recognized him immediately. He had grown from a kid to a teenager, but his laughter was exactly the same as it was before.
“Yo!”
He waved a hand, casually greeting me, so I responded in kind..
This reunion was the same as before, but time distanced us. In a second, our relationship was good as new, and of course, it’s something for us to be happy about.
I put Takuma’s luggage into the boot, and drove the car out of the parking lots. We went down the same county road we always took at a speed of 54km/h. If this was the speed we spent our three years of high school, the same could be said of our three years of university.
And surely, the remaining year would pass at the same speed.
Takuma might have sensed something while looking at the usual scenery outside the window, for he reeled his face back in, asking,
“Say Haru, how long will you stay here?”
“About another week or so. I came back once spring break started, so I’ve been here for a while. I’m going to start looking for a job soon. What about you?”

“I can’t say. I do have time, so I might stay around for a while. I got an offer.”
“Huh?”
He said those words with such ease, and I frowned. I was so rattled, my hands shook the steering wheel, and of course, the car reacted, nearly veering off the middle line.
“Woah, that was close.”
Takuma’s voice was filled with shock and reproach.
“You don’t have to be shocked about that. The fast ones already have the best jobs, and now they’re slaves to society.”
“I haven’t filled any application forms.”
“You’re more serious when it comes to weird stuff after all. Probably having the same thoughts as a middle school kid there, wondering what you want to do in life, right?”
“Ugh…”
“Bullseye. You know, I always thought you’re pretty stupid about this. Why can’t you just go first? Go and you’ll reach somewhere. There might be a place more interesting than what you imagine. The thing about roads is that they lead somewhere, but I don’t think you get that.”
I do man, so I quietly refuted without saying, and swallowed my words. I knew very well that we could keep going and meet something, but a lot of strength would be needed , or courage.
The big talk from my friend was a little too much, so I argued back.
“You returned because you argued with Hotta-san, right?”
Once I said this, Takuma was left speechless. Simply put, Makoto Hotta-san was Takuma’s girlfriend. Takuma was at a Tokyo university, and was already dating Hotta-san in Golden Year. She’s three years older than us, and studying for her Masters. I met her a few times. She’s pretty and intelligent, and was very reliable, an ideal adult.
After all, there were few on this world who could actually treat Takuma as a kid.
“How did you know? Did Mako tell you anything?”
Takuma’s glare was piercing through my face.
“No, that’s not it. I just got the feeling that what you said wasn’t just directed at me.”
“Ugh”
“Bullseye. I think you’re pretty clumsy at that too. Did she disagree with you?”
Takuma exhaled, and leaned into the seat. Well, it’s a big company we’re talking about, so he said in a rare, feeble voice.
“The pay’s good, and so are the benefits. It’s just that the vocation’s different from my major. She said it’s a waste of my talent to go there, but I find it pretty interesting.”
“Just to ask, was that your first option?”
“Unya, the third.”

“So that’s why she’s objecting, isn’t it?”
“You think so too?”
“She doesn’t want you to regret it, Takuma.”
“But this is the answer I got after thinking through it. I hoped she would give me a nudge in the back.”
“What?”
I made a right turn at the cross junction, into an alley, and stepped on the brakes to slow down a little. The car’s shaking as the road wasn’t really paved well, and so did Takuma and I. We were shaking at the same place.
“What?”
“Time for a breather.”
“So, what are you saying?”
“You’re lost too, just like me.”
“Shut up.”
Soon after, we saw a sign board indicating expansion roadworks leading to the city. Oh. I was delighted. We wouldn’t have to wait for the opposite vehicle to pass, and there would be fewer traffic accidents.
But we would have to destroy some nearby things to build this road extension. It’s impossible not to lose anything. The expansion area was not barricaded, and not leveled, but it was an empty ground. I could no longer remember what was at this place.
“Haru, was there something over here?”
It seemed Takuma had the same thought.
“I don’t remember anything, even though we often passed by here.”
“It feels empty. I can’t think of anything.”
“Anyway, you noticed? The convenience store outside the station has closed.”
“No it’s not.”
“It's closed alright. Just that there’s a new shop there. The town’s slowly changing without us knowing. Nothing Is eternal, and change is the only thing that’s most likely to continue.”
There’s something flowing between us. It’s a common feeling, and easy to express as an idiom.
But if I expressed it as words at this point, that thing would have gnawed through our hearts, and it’ll be really, really painful. That’s why we didn’t choose to do so.
After a while, Takuma muttered in the same manner he did before.
“Yep, I see it. Still the same old place.”
Before us was the unchanging silhouette of our high school, which we spent three years at. We knew that would happen, but Takuma and I let out little sighs..

It’s been a while since I came to high school. There’s no reason for me to return, if not for Takuma saying he had something for Watanabe-sensei, advisor for the basketball club, and asked me to come along.

We greeted the uncle at the guard house, and went to the staff room. It’s Saturday, but there’s Watanabe-sensei and a few others waiting for us.
The office tables were not exactly rearranged, but there were a few teachers who were reassigned. For example, there was a table, once decorated with children photos, now replaced by gunpla figures or something.
Looking into the office through the open windows were the sakura buds that were within reach. There were a few days until they bloomed.
It would be days after when the white flowers would begin to turn pink, fluttering in the air.
“Anyway Midou, you’ve grown again. Are you going to be above 2m anytime soon?”
“Impossible. I’ve stopped growing already. It’s just my manliness that has increased.”
“Wahaha. This kid’s quite the talker now.”
Watanabe-sensei slapped Takuma on the shoulder.
“Ow.”
Takuma said as he slapped sensei back on the shoulder. It’s a sight we never saw while we were in high school.
Takuma was often lectured during club activities, and always grumbled. But the time they spent together truly existed, and that’s why they’re able to talk just like old times. Since the efforts of the past had led them to such a future, I guess Takuma’s hard work in high school must have been really valuable.
So both of them started chatting about the juniors I didn’t know, and I kept my distance so as not to disturb them. There’s no need for bystanders when talking about the past.
At this moment, I met a teacher in the eyes.
She was smiling, somewhat bemusedly. The harsh eyes behind the glasses remained, but the vibe around her was much kinder than before.
It’s Kozato-sensei.
She's been a teacher for almost four years, so she's a lot more experienced at her job. Looking back, that stifling presence of hers must have been a defense mechanism for her serious personality.
All to prevent being underestimated by her students. All to be an independent contributor to society.
We were too distant from her when we were in high school, and that's why we never noticed, but three years since, I had a feeling I could understand her.
"It's been a while."
"Yes, it's been a while since I last saw you, Segawa."
"Me?"
"Midou does come back to play whenever he has time."
"Ah, I see, but there aren't many like Takuma out there."
"Yes."

Kozato-sensei smiled as kindly as she did before, pulling the lengthened hair behind her ears.
"Truly there aren't. Your daily life doesn't revolve around here. You graduated, grew up, and found your place elsewhere. I too was the same, but it's fine to come back once in a while, isn't it?"
"I'll think back to the past. Lots of it."
So I said, but I hardly had any memories of going out with my friends back in high school.
No, I didn't lose my memories, and wasn't bullied by my classmates.
I remembered that I would go to school as usual, attended the summer festivals with my friends, prepared for the exams seriously, went to pray at the shrine before the big exam.
It's just that, whenever I stepped out of school, I often acted independently.
I went alone to many places, did various things, and smiled alone.
It's been a long while, but these memories continued to flow within me like warm blood, never fading away.
I narrowed my eyes at the blue skies beyond the window, immersed in my memories.
I harbored many emotions during those days. There was elation, rage, anxiety, sadness, but added together, these were part of my youth. It's this adorable time that formed this present me.
"Yes, I was careless there. I thought you were an honest student to begin with, Segawa, but I never expected you to participate in the news club conspiracy."
"I think conspiracy is just stretching it. Anyway, you know about 'that', Kozato-sensei?"
Even as a graduate, I couldn't just openly mention about the 'pageant contest' in the staff room of all places. The teachers just appeared not to know, and didn't press on regarding the matter.
Kozato-sensei chuckled, probably understanding what was going on as she brought her face close to me, intending to whisper something, it seemed.
My ear gets a little tingling.
"I'm the advisor to the news club now."
She sounded really happy, and even I grinned without thinking.
Kozato-sensei's definitely more popular than when she was teaching us.

Watanabe-sensei and Takuma had much fun talking, so I left them behind and wandered around the school.
There were a few people in the teaching block even on this rest day, and nobody in particular minded about me in plain clothes. There was a boy dressed in that nostalgic school uniform passing me by, and he ran down the corridor with his head lowered.
In this place called the school, whether it’s the past or present, there’s no one who would actually abide by the ‘no running down the hallway’ rule.

I suddenly recalled the face of that female teacher who was of similar age to the present me. That face was replaced with an effervescent smile.
Ah, better correct myself here. There's no such person around. I guess Kozato-sensei's skipping down the hallway without anyone noticing.
I ascended the stairs, and went to the classroom we were once at. This classroom was completely empty because of the graduation ceremony, but there were traces of our juniors, whose names I knew not of. There were traces of congratulatory words on the blackboard, and the class goals different from our time.
Suddenly, I bumped into a table with some scars on its surface. I guess someone used a penknife to cut the surface while bored or something.
It so happened to be the position of the seat I sat at.
Since it's a rare opportunity, I sat down. The desk and chair weren't the ones I used though, so I guess that's why the scenery before me was different. No, perhaps it's because there's nobody sitting around me?
Everything I should have been familiar with looked a little faded. In any case, it's after the seasons passed that we knew the value of such importance.
The wind blew in through the open windows, causing the curtains to flutter, and the blue of the sky to seep into the deem classroom.
My world had returned to the time I was still a high school student. The teacher reciting the words on the textbook, the ruckus occurring during the breaks, Takuma making fun of me, Akane calling me.
But when the curtains covered the windows again, the dim classroom returned to the future three years later. The illusion vanished, never to be reached.
Time certainly had passed. This was no longer my seat.
I feel so lonely. So I thought. There truly was a memory that I was prone to recalling.
But I no longer am sad about this.
At 21 years old, I knew very well it was the right thing to do.

I laid down on the table, having a nap, but the cellphone in my pocket shook and woke me up. I didn't check who was the one calling as I moved in the usual manner, receiving the call.
"Pwoahhh□"
"Where are you now? What are you doing?"
Naturally, it's Takuma.
"Just napping in the classroom."
"Nice going man."
"Sorta. You done?"
"Oh, I guess I want to go to the gym before we go back. You coming over?"
"Got it. Let's meet there."
"Ui□"

I got up from the chair, and left the classroom. I took one last look at the classroom, ingraining the sight into my mind, and closed the door.
I then arrived at the stairs, descending it one step at a time.
I arrived at the first level, scanned the judo room with the corner of my eye, proceeded ahead and arrived at the gym.
As promised, Takuma was waiting.
“Kept you waiting.”
Takuma opened the door with the key he borrowed from Watanabe-sensei, and a court too big for the two of us appeared.
I was a little emotional thinking how I once stepped onto the court for the graduation ceremony, singing the school anthem and thinking I wouldn’t return to this place. Takuma quickly hurried to the equipment room as though it was his house, and took out two pair of somewhat old sneakers and a basketball. He tossed a pair that was not firmly tied high towards the tall ceiling of the gym, and I caught it, asking him what was going on. The voice quickly echoed in the room.
“Seriously, what now.”
“There are guys who forget to bring their shoes sometimes, so we hid the spares there. Lucky for us, our juniors did the same. Is that size big enough?”
I checked the number on the sole as he told me to, and it so happened to fit my feet.
“Uh, yeah.”
“Really? Good good, let’s play ball.”
“No I’m not playing.”
“Why?”
It felt like he really didn’t understand, but those were the words I wanted to say.
There’s not much of a contest between a guy who only played basketball during gym class, and a guy competing as a club member in high school and university.
“I’ll definitely lose.”
“How about one on one, you attack, Haru. Offense ends when the ball gets stolen. I give you ten chances. For me well…just once is good. The one with most points win.”
“How did you link what I said to this anyway?”
“Loser has to pay for today’s drinks.”
“Pay for today’s drinks? Stop ignoring what I have to say.”
Takuma then seemingly took what he said as final and put on his shoes. Feeling peeved, I did the same. I thought the spare shoes would have been worn out and tattered, but this one was well taken care of. It felt good wearing this pair.
We tied our shoelaces, stood up, and our tiptoed on the floor. The somewhat rigid sound quickly vanished

Takuma began to stretch towards his toes, checking on how his condition was. I too began to stretch, which I hadn't done in a long while. Soon after, my body began to heat up.
After our warm ups, Takuma threw the orange ball at me. I threw it back, and Takuma threw it back. This check ball signaled the start of our match.

Takuma pulled some distance from me, and waved to taunt me.
I batted the ball onto the court, and it quickly rebounded. The light shone through the ceiling window of the gym. I looked up and saw the sky outside. It's the spring blue I felt before, our youth. Some might call us immature, but unexpectedly, I didn't dislike this.
Ah, yeah, I didn't dislike this.
I took a deep breath, and exhaled hard. Then, in one motion, I charged to the hoop.
Of course, Takuma slid to block my frontal offense. There's a body length between us, and I kept dribbling while ensuring his hands could not touch.
"You talked so much, but you ended up playing anyway."
"If I don't play along, this friend of mine will cry."
"Ah really? Thanks then. Hah!"
Takuma brushed by my left hand, and reached his long arm towards the ball, so I spun around to break through.
"Ohhh!"
I could hear Takuma's shocked voice from behind, and I too was shocked. It felt good dribbling past someone. Well done.
Before my eyes was an empty, brand new world. I guess anyone who played basketball had such a feeling, and endured much training to repeat that experience again.
My mind suddenly recalled the falling face of that kid I met the previous day.
But the kid didn't seem to have such a feeling. More like an earnest wish.
I charged into that empty paradise, slowed down, and with the shoes rubbing friction against the floor, I stopped, jumped, and threw the ball at the hoop.
The ball spun nicely as it gravitated towards the hoop. I clenched my fist in excitement. Good, there's no way I lose then. Since Takuma had only one chance to attack, he could block the ball another nine times, and the worst case scenario would be a draw.
But that naïve thinking was swatted away by an outstretched arm from behind, along with the basketball. As for whose hand that was, it's obvious; unless there's a ghost roaming around, the only other guy on this court was Takuma.
That friend ran after the swatted ball, caught it, and grinned away.
"9 times."
Before I realized it, I was being all serious.

I was at my best condition during the first round.
Following that was the second, third, fourth…and the longer it kept up, even I knew that my offense was not as sharp. My legs were aching, and my arms were heavy. During my university lessons, I participated in the sports elective, and never actually had other opportunities to exercise. That elective ended in the first half of my first year, so playing basketball this time was a proper exercise after two and a half years.
And most importantly, Takuma had set his distance well after the first round, maintaining an impenetrable defense. I didn't have much room to shoot.
"You, physical freak."
I was panting hard, glaring at the nonchalant looking friend.
"Hu hu, I'll take that as a compliment."
The eighth offense ended, and the result was still zero. In the blink of an eye, I had two chances left. I really had the urge to punch the me who thought 'I just need to score once'.
Takuma threw the ball at me. I caught it, and retreated to the three point line. If I didn't regain a little of my stamina, even the winnable rounds would be unwinnable. So I wanted to buy some time as I spoke to Takuma. I didn't know if it was useless, but I was shaking. Mental strength has a big impact in sports.
If there's someone cheering me on, I could have performed better than my usual usuals. If there's someone I love waiting for me at the finish line, I definitely could finish a 100m sprint in five seconds…wait, that's impossible. At the very least, such things could have nudged me forward.. There's definitely a moment when I could use that.
"Say,Takuma."
"What? You giving up now?"
"No way man. I just thought of something."
I thought of the sidelong face of the kid I met the previous day. Takuma raised an eyebrow.
"About why Hotta-san wouldn't let you work at that company…"
"Don't talk about that now."
While Takuma said that and let down his guard, I threw the ball at him. Due to his many years of experience, he instinctively received the ball. I charged forward.
"Ah, hey, that's despicable."
"Don't call it despicable. I'll prefer it if you call it tactics."
I charged towards Takuma in two steps, saw that he reacted instinctively, and shifted my center of gravity elsewhere as planned, breaking through his defenses. Even with his overwhelming physical capabilities, there's no way he's not tired in the slightest. His knees buckled, and he lost balance. Seizing this opportunity, I approached the basket.

A little later, I sensed Takuma giving chase. If I were to shoot at this point, it would be a repeat of my first attempt.
I waited for him to catch up, and held the ball with two hands. Takuma assumed I was about to shoot, and could only jump. I straightened my legs, my soles still stuck to the floor.
"Ah."
Takuma cried. I delayed my movements, and jumped behind Takuma. Everything appeared to be in slo-mo, whether it's the slightly loose laces, Takuma's peeved look, the gym ceiling, the blue skies, and a step further back, the basket I was aiming at. I shot the ball.
"Go!"
My shirt was soaked in sweat before I knew it. My throat was parched. Yet this was the best moment for me.
The orange ball touched the rim, bounced, and tried its best to maintain balance as it swirled a few rounds before landing through the hoop.
"Ah damn it. Got bluffed by such a simple pump fake."
I ignored my groaning friend and started my final offense, but that too got blocked. There's nothing more meaningless than a second miracle. Most importantly, I was out of stamina.
"Now I got two points. You want to continue, Takuma?"
"Of course. Why are you making it sound like you've won?"
We slapped each other on the palm, and switched over. Fuuu, Takuma caught his breath, and threw the ball over. I threw the ball back as Takuma did, but he was so fast, the moment he caught the ball, he shot it as naturally as he breathed.
"Huh?"
I couldn't do anything as I watched the ball fly in an arc, and gravitated through the hoop. It didn't hit the rim, silent and pretty. Once the net shook, time finally returned and began to move.
“Hm, I win.”
Takuma clenched his fist, declaring his win.
“How? Isn’t it a tie?”
“Are you stupid? I shot a three pointer. That’s three points. You got two. The rules say that more points win. So I win.”
“Feels like I saw this scene in a manga or something. Man, that’s low of you. You’ve been aiming for this right all the way, haven’t you?”
“Uhahaha, sorta. Ahhh, good game.”
It seemed his grumbles from before was an act. I didn’t like it, but it’s my loss. Takuma grabbed the bouncing ball beneath the hoop, and slammed it down. That technique was completely different from mine as an amateur. The ball seemingly came alive in his hands, was sucked back in, and left.
“Oh yeah, Haru. About the penalty for drinks later,”
“Got it. I lost, I lost. I’ll treat today.”
“Ah, not that. You don’t have to pay for drinks. Let’s continue with what we talked about.”

“What we talked about?”
“Ah, you forgot about it completely? Was that just a bluff?”
“So what was that all about?”
“About the reason why Mako wouldn’t let me work there.”
“Ah that.”
I completely forgot.
“Rather than a bluff, I’ll say that I have a thought. Hasn’t Hotta-san been nudging you from behind?”
“Which part did you hear that makes you think so?”
“Hmm, well, I don’t think she’s the type to stop you from moving on just because it’s a waste of talent or something.”
I said as I wondered if he had noticed this. He didn’t know why she did so, sensed that she was acting differently from usual, and escaped back here.
Takuma stopped dribbling, and started spinning it on his fingertip.
“I see. And then?”
“So I was wondering, why would she be opposed? I’m not Hotta-san, so this might not be the correct answer, but I get the feeling she’s nudging you over the last hurdle.”
If Takuma’s thoughts were to be shaken because of Hotta-san’s opposition, he’s going to regret his decision down the road, surely. If he ignores her opposition and insists on going down this road, he might encounter some hardships, but he should be able to keep moving on. If he keeps reaching out to the future as earnestly as the kid’s wishes, then surely—
“Haru, you’ve changed.”
“Have I?”
“You do. But thanks. I feel a lot better.”
“That’s good.”
Our voices echoed clearly in the gym with only us inside, and then vanishing completely.
I drove to Takuma’s house, and dropped him and his bags there. We’re supposed to split and attend a drinking party later that night, but we were earlier than expected. The reason was that Takuma was physically present in the car, but he was spacing out completely. He probably had things to think of, and had someone he wanted to talk to. For that reason, it seemed he wanted to be alone for a while.
“See you tonight.”
“Oh, thanks. Sorry about that.”
“Don’t worry. It’s a small thing.”
I started the car, and in a blink, the guy much taller than me shrank. I could see him waving in the rearview mirror the entire time.

I returned home to find Natsuna glaring back at the oven.
The long black hair tied in a ponytail was swaying left and right, conveying its emotions like a dog’s tail. She hummed away, her voice crisp like a rising

oriole. The room was filled with a delightful humming and the sweet scent of sugar.
Until middle middle, my little sister had the personality of a boy. Ever since she joined club activities in high school, she changed completely. It seemed like the excessive energy that had nowhere to go was depleted thanks to her club activities.
So Natsuna became an ordinary high school student, the change in demeanour so sudden it was depressing.
She had more female friends, knew what shame was, and worked hard on cooking and cosmetics. I never exactly talked to her, but she might have a crush.
“Ah, Haru-kun, welcome back”
And despite that, she showed an innocent smile once she noticed me, one I was most familiar with.
“I’m back. What are you baking?”
“Apple pie. I just saw it on the TV. It looks interesting, so I tried baking one of my own.”
“Heh~sounds good. I want to try it out.”
“Eh? You’re not eating dinner at home tonight, Haru-kun?”
“Yeah. Got a beer party for uni students tonight.”
I took out a milk carton from the fridge, and poured its contents out. The white liquid splashed away, and its level rose in the glass cup. The carton in my right hand was lighter, and the last drop fell onto the surface, causing a ripple.
“Is beer nice to drink?”
Natsuna reached her hand out to me, so I tossed the empty carton over, and she soaked it in water, washed it, and dried it.
“Can’t say. I guess if it’s you, the apple pie might taste a lot better.”
“I think I'll skip that. Do you really want the apple pie?”
"Of course. There's still some time until the beer party. I just exercised, so I'm a little hungry."
I nodded as I gulped down the milk. Once I finished the entire glass, I found myself thirstier than expected.
"Alright. It should be done in another five minutes. I'll get it ready, so go get changed. It's going to be good fresh out of the oven."
"Sounds good."
I placed the glass back at the kitchen, and Natsuna naturally washed the glass. I thanked her, and she waved her hand, staring at the oven as excitedly as she did before.
I heard her continue to hum as I left the living room, and returned to my room.

I had a nice hot shower, returned to the living room, and found Natsuna seated on the sofa, puffing her cheeks, looking furious. I apologized, and sat down next to her.

There’s an apple pie cut in a triangular slice and placed on the glass dining table. Next to it was a serving of vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce on it. Due to the heat from the apple pie next to it, the ice cream melted a little, and it’s probably the reason why Natsuna was fuming.
“I bought the ice cream.”
Natsuna might have misunderstood the intent behind my expression as she said sheepishly.
“No no no, I’m just thinking that it looks good.”
“Really?”
“Yeah. So I’m thinking, let’s tuck in.”
“Yep, itadakimasu.”
“Itadakimasu.”
So we said, and used our forks to stab at the pie, causing a crisp sound. The sweet scent of the pie got richer, and the apple was so soft, glowing golden. I cut a slice of the pie, and brought it to my mouth. First I tasted the butter, and after chewing twice, thrice, I tasted the sourness of the apple. I might be biased towards family, but I thought it’s tastier than the one sold in the shops.
“Hm, it tastes really good.”
“Great.”
Natsuna saw me eat a mouthful of pie, and took a mouthful too. She chewed it carefully, swallowed, and boasted her own pastry skill.
We sat together, sharing the apple pie as we switched the TV on. It’s a Saturday evening, so there wasn’t any show that really drew our attention. We swapped channels, and finally ended up at the local news section. The reports I saw a few times were visiting unfamiliar towns.
“They look happy.”
“Really? Reporting is a job. It’s tough, isn’t it?”
“No, I’m talking about you. Did something good happen?”
“Eh, I think I can call it a good thing. It’s because you said the pie’s nice, Haru-kun.”
“Just because of this small thing?”
“It’s a small thing, but I’m glad to be praised for putting my effort into something, moreso if it's something I like.”
I took another bite of the apple pie, chewed and swallowed, and called my sister’s name,
“Natsuna.”
“What?”
“It’s really good.”
“Oh.”
“You happy?”
“Very.”
“Then thank me.”
“Thank you for saying my apple pie’s good.”
“Don’t mention it.”

“Eh? I’m the one treatin you. Why do I have to thank you?”
“Finally realized it?”
I giggled. Natsuna had the fork in her mouth as she pouted unhappily. At this moment, something happened, like instant karma for me teasing Natsuna.
There was a familiar face on the TV appearing in my eyes, and I was so shocked, I nearly choked on the apple pie. I started coughing, my chest in much pain, and I only manawas thanks to Natsuna frantically patting me on the back, giving me some iced red tea. Even on the brink of death, I stared intently at the TV.
That guy’s hair was short, his beard trimmed, but there remained the hulking body, deep voice, and childish eyes that were sparkling like stars. I could still remember them vividly.
It’s the director.
“Wooooo! I finally did it!”
He’s on the TV, shouting loudly.
“Yo-you alright, Haru-kun?”
Natsuna’s worried voice sounded so vague.
“Director.”
“Eh?”
Natsuna stared at the TV along with me. The words appearing on the screen were :Amateur Movie Producer, recipient of XXXX prize, movie title XXXX, genre XXXX.
Entering my mind were some fragmented messages, and I couldn’t sort them out completely.
The only thing I was certain about was how he was a youth who had immature dreams like a kid, kept pursuing it, and was about to fulfill it.
“Ahahaha!”
I burst out laughing. I was really moved, shivering, and though my little sister was looking at me worriedly like I was a madman, I couldn’t help it. I just burst out laughing; that’s all I could do in this situation, no?
He might have placed his fingers on the starting line, but I was moved to see the director after so many years.
Those that put in hard work reaped their rewards. I really loved such obvious stories.
“Haru-kun, you know him?”
Once I stopped laughing, Natsuna, who knew nothing, asked me while looking terrified. Her expression was really bemusing, so I pinched her little nose. She didn’t seem comfortable with that, since she was struggling, lashing out,
“What are you doing!?”
The news then proceeded to the next section.
It was a brief reunion after many years. The next time I see the director, he will surely be on another stage.

I really wanted to meet the director who stood on that vast stage, not noticing me. I hoped to see his name while strolling around town, seeing the movie posters, or in other media. If it was possible, to whom would I speak of this pride nobody else knew of?
—I have a temporary actor in this film.
So I quietly prayed for that little miracle in my heart.

I left home a little earlier than the agreed time, and went to the park. Present was a little silhouette sprinting furiously towards the sun. It seemed he didn't notice me, so I went to a vending machine to purchase a sports drink and a hot cocoa, the latter for myself. I held the cold PET bottle in my right hand, the hot can in my left, and went to the boy, calling his name.
"Oi, Haruto."
"Eh, ah, woah!!"
Haruto was startled by this, tumbling over. He flailed his arms about to stop himself from falling over, maintaining his balance. His face was a little red, neither because of the sunset, nor that he was holding his breath, and naturally, not that he was bashful. It was the best proof of him working hard alone.
Soon, he heaved a sigh, barely managing to hang on, and smiled, calling my name in a prepubescent voice,
"Segawa Haruyoshi-san."
"Why the full name?"
"Why, you ask? Hmmm…because you're older than me?"
This reason was a little ridiculous.
"Well, you can call me Segawa, or Haruyoshi, or if that's still no good, you can call me Haru. The full name is very long to read, right?"
"Hm…I'll call you Segawa-san."
"Why?"
"Well, because my name sounds similar."
"Hm, I'll call you by your name then. Your name is?"
"Eh?"
"Hm?"
Haruto stared at me, looking a little stunned, and then,
"Guess I'll keep it a secret for now. Please call me Haruto for now, Segawa-san."
He said, looking a little happy.
"Is that good enough?"
"Yep, that's good enough."
"I'll call you that then."
I said, putting the PET bottle on his red cheek. Startled, he made a girlish shriek,
"Wh-wha-wha-what are you doing!?"
"Encouraging for you from this big brother here, Haruto. Drink up."
"Really? Thank you."

It seemed he had forgotten he was teased, as he took the PET bottle quickly, and began drinking.
“Huu…so good.”
“That’s good.”
Haruto drank it down in several gulps, and meekly dropped the bottle into the trash bin. I finished the cocoa, and sat on the bench. Haruto appeared to be at a loss of what to do, but once I patted the seat next to him, he sat down, leaving a human-sized gap between us.
“It hurts seeing you so far from me.”
“I’m covered in sweat after all.”
“I don’t mind.”
“I do. Very.”
I cautiously focused on my nose, making sure Haruto wouldn’t notice that I was being sensitive. There’s a scent of ‘spring’ becoming richer on this spring day that was becoming warmer. Of course, I didn’t smell any sweat.
“St-stop smelling!”
“You found.”
“Are you a weirdo, Segawa-san?”
“What are you saying? It’s the first time anyone has said this about me.”
“I told you not to smell, and you’re smelling my sweat.”
Haruto gave an utterly disgusted look.
“Sorry. Didn’t think you’ll hate it. I won’t do that again.”
“You swear?”
“I swear.”
“I forgive you.”
“I shouldn’t be the one saying this, but you should learn to doubt others a little.”
“Well, you’re a weirdo, Segawa-san, but you aren’t a bad person. I’m a kid, but I can still tell.”
He grinned.
“I see. You’re an honest kid, Haruto. I’m an adult, I can tell.”
“Really?”
“Yeah.”
“If that’s true, that’s great.”
“Say, Haruto?”
“What?”
The swing continued to swing, the see-saw heaving up and down, the anonymous butterflies flying over the flowers. I watched these silently, and after some time, I voiced out the doubt I had,
“Why are you running so hard?”
“Eh?”
“Is there a reason?”
“You can tell?”
“Well, sorta. I experienced such things before.”

Haruto looked hesitant to talk, wondering if he should. I silently waited. The minute hand of the park just passed 5pm. My meetup with Takuma was at 7pm, so there's still some time.
Soon after, Haruto hopped off the bench. His toes touched the ground, and he stood firmly, but his legs were wobbly. He turned towards me, looking troubled, teary, yet putting on a forced smile. It was a strange sight.
"Segawa-san, have you experienced being alone?"
There was a little shadow formed behind Haruto, by the sun shining upon him. His shadow remained lonely over there, not tied to anyone. I had a thought, and answered honestly,
"…Nope."
"Really, that's good. I experienced that. About a year ago, the friends I got along well with suddenly stopped playing with me. I know the reason, but I can't solve it. I still want to be with them though, so I imitated everyone, but I couldn't get along with them. So I end up all alone."
What Haruto spoke of was a common situation of people becoming alone. To him, this might be more unbearable than the apocalypse. I casually gauged Haruto's mood, and because of this, I couldn't just console him.
I was thinking, it would be great if the world was simpler.
If only reality was a video game, where a kind spell could heal all wounds.
"But I got a chance. They say if I want to join them, I'll have to run a 100m race against him. If I win, I get to join them. This is the reason why I'm running."
Ah, but I guess this is the reason. There's no such spell on this world, and that's why the boy kept running, baring his fangs to the world, resisting, working hard with his trembling legs, slender, fragile limbs.
"That's cool, Haruto. Real cool."
I stood up, messily ruffling Haruto's head.
"Woah. What are you doing!?"
Haruto grumbled, but looked a little happy, frowning a lot less before. Nevertheless, it didn't mean something was settled.
It's one thing if he won, but if he lost—
A confused Haruto looked at my hand that stopped, and grabbed my hand with his little hand. Our shadows overlapped.
"I hate being alone. I'm scared about that. I'll feel a lot better if I die."
Then, Haruto lifted his head.
I was the one who started this conversation, but I couldn't find anything to say to him. I guess my expression was weird. I should be the one encouraging him, but it's him, the suffering one, who was worried about me.
"I was joking."
So he said in a tone that implied otherwise.

Haruto and I went our separate ways, and I walked alone.
The day was long, yet to be dark. The world remained engulfed in light.

I arrived near the station, and even though it’s not time yet, I took a long route to the bar we’re supposed to meet at.
“I hate being alone.” The boy’s voice continued to echo in my ears, never fading. I felt conflicted, sickened. My emotions were out of control, fluctuating irrational, not caring that I might be hurting myself.
“Hate being alone…”
I muttered to myself, and suddenly thought of something.
Why did I answer so? No, what prompted me to answer?

“Segawa-san, have you experienced being alone?”
“…Nope.”

Isn’t it weird? I’m alone, always alone, but never lonely. I was never truly lonely. There’s no way I couldn’t have anyone accompany me all the time.
Before I knew it, I walked too far past the bar.
“Let’s go back.”
I called out, lifted my head, and found a white cat before me. It's a kitten, small in size, and had blue eyes. I looked into those blue eyes, and soon after, it turned away, not even purring. For some reason however, I got a feeling it was calling me along. The white cat never looked back, as though knowing I would follow along.
Cats aren't really anything special to me. I don't really like cats. White cats in particular however left a little scar in my heart, one I can't say could be called a memory.
The white cat sauntered into the shopping arcade, so I hurriedly gave chase. The uncle at the fish shop called for it, and it splendidly ignored him. That uncle however wasn't angry, and instead was impressed, as though thinking that stray cats should behave this way.
"If ya hungry, come look for me."
I couldn't understand cat language, but the cat finally purred.
It's been a while since I came to the shopping arcade. It felt so distant from me ever since I started driving.
I saw the bookstore I shopped at a few times. It's a small one, didn't have much stocks, but had books other bookstores wouldn't have, so I would occasionally visit.
And then there's the Antiquarian bookstore I read books at for free. The uncle's still reading a book, as usual.
There was the taiyaki-selling granny I occasionally visited after school, chatting with a customer. I remembered buying one back then, custard cream flavor. The sweetness of that taiyaki remained memorable.
Then, I followed the white cat to a building I never saw before. It purred, as though saying this was the end.
I stopped in my tracks.
This used to be an empty space.
I once buried a white cat here.

At 14 years old, I faced death for the first time, and this was the only thing I could do.
If only,
I didn't know if this assumption had meaning, but if that cat didn't die, what could I have done for it. Could I have saved that white cat from its loneliness?
The boy's voice continued to ring in my ears.

“I hate being alone. I’m scared about that. I’ll feel a lot better if I die.”

Ah, yes.
It's frustrating to be alone.
I didn't know when exactly did I become such a person. But starting from a certain moment, my heart would ache whenever I saw a lonely one. I spoke to Haruto because I could sense the loneliness from his sidelong face.
It's completely unrelated, but my mind suddenly recalled Takuma's voice,

"Probably having the same thoughts as a middle school kid there, wondering what you want to do in life, right?"

What I want to do.
What I could do.
What would that be?
There's an unspeakable feeling giving me the urge to yell. Once I relax, it would tear through my body from within, gnawing through my organs, bones and skin, breaking into the outside world.
But as an adult, I knew it was pointless to do that. Thus, I looked up at the sky.
The night stars started to poke out. At this point, I couldn't see all the spring stars. I sought out the α Boötis, Arcturus. The Polynesians once used that start as their guiding beacon, leading them to Hawaii, and it was called the Hōkūleʻa, Star of Gladness.
Could Haruto and I arrive at a certain place? Would the Star of Gladness shine upon us? My eyes had yet to capture that orange light.
Before I knew it, the white cat had vanished.

I arrived at the bar about 30 minutes late, and found 2 empty bear mugs on the table. I lowered my friend, whose face remained unchanged, in apology.
"Sorry for being late."
"It's fine. These two are on you."
Saying that, Takuma waved a hand, ordering another glass. I too ordered the same.
A minute later, the cold beer was served to us, so we brought our glasses together, giving the usual cheers,

""Cheers!""
I gulped down half the beer, giving a hearty voice before slamming the glass back onto the table. The beer shook, and so did the bubbles. I could sense the alcohol moving all over my body.
"What dishes did you order?"
"Hm? Edamame and broth broiled eggs, stir fried beansprouts, takowasa, and then six different kinds of sashimi. I wanted to order meat once you showed up. Anything you don't eat?"
"Anything except for konjac."
"That's weird. Konjac's nice."
"I just hate the feeling."
We started chatting away like it was during the day, talking about things that we would forget once we woke up. Once we leave the shop, we might forget what we talk about, and the next time we show up, we'll talk about the same things.
After drinking for an hour or so, Takuma, who could hold his liquor, switched from beer to Japanese wine. I just took a cup with him, and the rich aroma of the wine stung at my nose.
I had a gulp, and the liquid slipped past my tongue, entering my throat, causing my body to heat up. Hey, can you take another? Takuma chirped, so I played along and brought my empty cup. He tried to get me drunk as he poured another cup of clear liquid.
Right when I was about to drink the second cup, I heard a voice from the neighboring table.
There were partitions between the seats, but I could hear the neighboring conversation as it was too thin. We shouldn't be eavesdropping. It's basic etiquette, but I heard of a familiar name, so naturally, I responded. So I quietly made up such an excuse for myself.
Takuma didn't speak up, instead checking with me using his eyes. I grinned back, and finished my half glass as response. We quiet down, eavesdropping on the neighboring conversation.
"Ahh, never thought this onee-san has the chance to come to a bar with you, Matsuu. I'm moved."
"Eh, erm, actually, I still can't drink beer."
"Eh, really?"
"Yes, I'm only 20 in June. Sorry, Miya-senpai."
"Ah, don't worry. It's stupid making a fuss out of it. But you're right, I'm 20 now. Hmm, we should have gone to a trendy restaurant."
"No, it's fine. I do like such a place. And…"
And the girl called Matsuu, maybe the junior, exhaled, making it feel like she's going to confess or something.
"Rindou-senpai and Miya-senpai are my benefactors. I'm happy to be with you."
"Well, I can understand if it's Akane-senpai, but why me?"

"It's thanks to you two. Three years ago, you lowered your head to Rindou-senpai with me, and I was able to keep swimming back then. I intend to continue swimming."
Speaking of Akane Rindou, her fame in the swimming world was no longer limited to our town, but the entire country. She became an Olympic candidate, and coupled with her cheery disposition and appearance, her popularity had increased. She's appearing in news, and sometimes, even on variety TV. Her light was no inferior to the models, idols or actresses, but it didn't mean that she changed.
Ever since she was in high school, I found her dazzling. It's just that her dazzling light was discovered by many. That's all.
However, that alone made me really happy.
"Ehehe. Well, let's take it as that. It's awkward hearing this from a junior who made it to the Nationals. Ahh, but I feel redeemed hearing these words. Our batch didn't have a talent like Akane-senpai or Matsuu. That's why we're called the 'failed generation'."
"But those are the words of those who don't understand anything. You don't have to care about that. Rindou-senpai and I are really grateful for you, Miya-senpai. Really. Ah, why are you giving me such a doubting look? We started chatting lots about you recently during our mealtimes after training. Eh, why are you starting to cry? The beer? Maybe you should stop drinking? Ah, I see. Drink a little more. I'll have some orange juice. Eh, understood. If you say so, I'll drink some ginger ale. It's a little spicy for me, but I'll do my best for you, Miya-senpai. Ah, sorry. Please give us one more beer and ginger ale. Yes, thank you."
Soon after, we heard snivelling and giggles from the table next to us. It sounded like they were our high school juniors. We would cheer on Akane during her races, so maybe I had seen them before. Of course, we're not going to check on their appearances.
Before I knew it, Takuma was already pouring one out for myself, so I snatched some for myself.
Finally, Takuma's face turned as red as me. His slightly empty eyes were showing my face, and I got a feeling he's drunk. Takuma and I were both drunk.
And it might for this reason, Takuma said such things,
"Hey, you didn't go dating with Akane during high school?"
How did it go anyway, so he continued, but his voice couldn't overcome the noise in the the shop. He suppressed his volume to a level only I could hear.
"Why ask this out of a sudden?"
"It's not really sudden. I already asked you that. You know this very well."
"Eh, well, it's too sudden to ask this."
I chuckled back, and Takuma exhaled a hot breath full of alcohol."
"To be honest, it's because of the conversation next to me. I thought I should just ask, while we're drunk."
"While we're drunk, huh?"

"You get it, don't you. It's meaningless when it's just guys gathered together, but we're all curious. You guys are important friends to me, you know?"
"I know. I feel the same about you. What we feel about Akane's definitely the same, same goes for the juniors next table. How about we just go 1, 2, 3 and say it out loud?"
Eh, seemed like we're more drunk than we thought, since we're able to say something so embarrassing like 'important friends'.
It's another matter if I were to say this to a girl at a special place, but we're good friends who knew each other since middle school, and we're in an ordinary bar.
The noise in the shop suddenly felt like it had weight, surrounding us. The voices of all genders and ages mixed around, but it didn't feel dirty. It's like there's a marble floor separating us.
"Eh, but, Akane only acts like a brother around us, and a girl before you. You couldn't not have noticed that, right?"
He struck me where it hurt. To be honest, I didn't notice her feelings at all, I didn't have the delicacy. It was only when she brought me to the empty classroom after school that I realized. I was immature and ull, and until the very end of the end, I could only hurt Akane.
I recalled in my mind, the classroom scene, Akane's expression. Our conversation and the feelings I had remained unchanged. It's just admiration, not love, that's all.
"Hm, but Takuma. I think I fell for someone else back then."
“That’s the first time I heard of this. You got someone else you like?”
“I guess so.”
“It’s like…you said it as though it has nothing to do with you.”
“That was Akane’s instinct though.”
“What the hell is that?”
“Who knows?”
Takuma frowned upon hearing that. He seemed a little angry. Eh, no? Befuddled? He emptied the glass, ordered another glass, drank up and ate the sashimi. Over this entire time, he was scowling.
“I don’t understand what are you talking about.”
Takuma downed a piece of sashimi and slammed the table. The shock caused the wine in the glass to shake. Then, he suddenly frisked out his phone, and made a call. It connected after a few tones, and in a drunken tone, he said,
"Yo, it's been a while. You alright there? Eh? It's only been two weeks? That's long for me. Hm, right. Guhahaha, I'm drunk. Don't be so merciless. Aren't we good friends? Ah, yeah. Mako wants to go out drinking with you again. Yeah. Call her next time. I'll handle the rest."
Takuma then looked over towards me. I silently ate the fatty tuna he left until the very end, and he looked utterly devastated, but I ignored him.

Once I heard the voice coming from his phone, I knew what he was planning. It's just me making a compromise.
"I'm out drinking with that guy. Will have him say a few words with you."
Once the phone left Takuma's ear, Eh, who's that guy? I could hear that voice. It's a voice I'm very familiar with.
Takuma handed over the red phone to me, his eyes were clearly saying, don't you dare run away now. You just ate my fatty tuna.
The last time we met was probably during our class reunion half a year ago, last year. I would see her on TV from time to time, so I didn't feel really nostalgic. I swallowed the fatty tuna meat.
"Hello?"
I grabbed the phone, and greeted. Huh, Haru? And there was a very familiar girl's voice, my good friend Akane Rindou. Her voice was filled with shock and delight.
"Yo, it's been a while."
"Eh, how? You're in Tokyo now, Haru?"
"No way. I just came back home with Takuma. It's spring break now."
"Ahh, I see. Too bad, I want to see you too."
Akane sounded like she really wanted to see me, and I was really happy, but I did my best to swallow back the 'I want to see you too' words, since it's too sickeningly sweet.
Instead, I changed the topic with the words, speaking of which.
"I see you often on TV. That's amazing."
"I'm not. I'm just working hard."
"No. I'm saying you're amazing at this."
"...A long time ago, probably in middle school, the guy I liked once said that he hoped for me to charge forward with all my might. That's why I'm working hard."
"Ugh, about that."
"Sorry sorry. Just want to tease you."
"I'm serious. Apologize now."
"That's why I'm saying I'm sorry."
Akane laughed, and so did I.
Takuma happily stared at us. What? So I gave him that look, nah, it's nothing, and he shook his head.
After that, we chatted about some other topics, about our common friends, when we are returning to our hometown, and the next time we're going drinking together.
After that, I tried talking about the elementary school kid I met days ago, the sidelong face working hard, the loneliness he had, and what I wanted to do for him.
But could I really help him? What could I have done for him? I was really troubled, but I just couldn't take the next step. Ehh, I just felt that I was grumbling, embarrassingly enough for me. It's no wonder Akane replied such.

Once she heard my words, "Are you an idiot?" she chuckled,
"I can't deny that."
"Yeah. Why are you the one hesitating? The one troubled is the kid, right? Buck up. It's your responsibility."
"That's an exaggeration."
"It really isn't. Since you took the first step, it's your responsibility. Relax, I know that you're someone who'll help others really well. I was once helped by you, and I got the strength to move forward. The vocal support you gave me has been, and is still my motivation."
"Akane."
"What?"
"Are you drunk?"
I was embarrassed, and tried to pass it off as a joke. My face was so hot. Thankfully, Takuma said that he was going to the toilet, so I was grateful for some alone time. It's not because of the alcohol. I was drunk on something more important. It's because of this that I didn't want others to see how useless I looked.
"I'm, not, drinking. Seriously. It's rare to hear you actually discuss something with me for real, and that's why I'm being serious here. How rude."
Akane didn't really sound angry when she said this. It seemed she knew I was trying to hide my own embarrassment, but despite that, she's not going to respond jokingly like this. Yeah, Akane Rindou's such an outstanding person.
That's why I respected her. It's nothing to do with like or dislike.
It might not be what Akane had hoped for, but I preferred to watch her from far behind, than to walk alongside her.
"Thank you."
"Huhu. Don't be so courteous now."
"I'll try that."
"Yep, just do that, Haru. If you want to support him, do it. Cheer him on, give him a nudge in the back. People can move forward easily, just like this.
Ah yes, I'll try cheering up the timid Haru then."
So Akane said,
"I'll do my best. No, I'm doing my best now."
I recalled the old Akane, back when she was in middle school, wearing the school swimsuit, looking a lot smaller than before, dazzling in the light. Each droplet falling from her was a blob of light.
She raised her fist, looking a little bashful, but smiling brightly like the sun.

--Do your best too, Haru.

So I responded.
"Ah, I see."

Akane said that my voice gives her strength, but this shouldn't be the case. At this point, I realized that I too received strength.
"What?'
"Well, I just feel that I'm able to work hard now."
"Right?"
The Akane Rindou I could think of was giving a red, but gleeful face. Even though the silhouette was younger than she presently was, they were giving the same light.
It’s really great that I got to meet Akane and become friends.
But despite being drunk, I couldn’t spit it out.

The next day, Haruto was at the park, as expected, sprinting as usual. Unlike the usual, he noticed me before I spoke to him. He kept moving his little body towards me, not hiding his delight in the slightest.
“Morning, Segawa-san. You’re early today.”
“Morning, Haruto. You knew I would be coming?”
“Actually, I was thinking that it’s great if you’re here..”
His expression softened, his nimble eyes curling into crescents as he showed a smile befitting his age. I guess it’s because of his honesty. Once he ran to me, he tilted his head, looking confused.
“Why are you wearing a sweatshirt?”
“Hm? Just want to train with you today. Ah, actually, to work hard with you. I was on the track team in middle school. I think I can teach you a few tricks.”
“Really?”
“Yep. Let’s work hard and win together.”
“…Can I?”
This time, I nodded firmly, answering,
“Of course.”
“Please guide me well.”
We made fistbumps, and despite the differences in size and shape, it’s as we promised. Nevertheless, reality’s not manga, and there’s no way to level up in mere days. It seemed Haruto understood very well, and kept practicing the starts.
“Well, Taiki…eh…Taiki’s the friend who want to race me. My 100m time’s about the same as him, but when we start, he always pulls away from me, and I just couldn’t beat him. If possible, please teach me how to perfect my starts…”
It seemed there was a reason why he was practicing his starts.
I demonstrated to Haruto, teaching him things like: not to raise the upper body immediately after starting, but to lower oneself, and stare at the ground, to wave the arms fully when running, and take large strides. He’s not used to starting from low positions, and stumbled over a few times

running out. His exposed cheeks were cut a few times, bleeding. He frowned, looking in pain. But whenever I panicked and went forward, he stood on his own strength, and smiled saying he was fine. He would then put his hands on the ground, lifting his head towards the front. I would stop to watch.
“Ready!”
I clapped hard. Haruto was startled for a moment before running. The start was decent, but the response was slow.
“Still too slow.”
“Hm, it feels like I’m thinking of so many things. What do you think of when you run, Segawa-san?”
“Me? Well…”
I recalled the day that was so distant in the past, and put my fingers on the ground, something I had not done in a long while.
The older I was, the taller I got, and my distance to the ground instance. I was no longer like the current Haruto, not running without restraint, not falling over. It’s been a while since I touched the ground like this. The moment I exerted strength into my fingers, my fingertips were as red as that day.
I suddenly looked to the front, and the vision I had changed from the park to the track of my middle school. The season changed from spring to summer, the hot air, the smell of dirt, the strikingly blue sky, the clouds piled together. What was I thinking of back then? What did I see?
The silhouette of the one I called friend? Or something else?
All I could remember was the emptiness in the future (front) I could see.
But…
“————wa-san,Segawa-san. What’s wrong? You alright? Did I say anything weird?”
“Eh? Ah, I’m fine. Sorry to make you worry.”
I apologized, stood up, waving my hand to dust off the dirt on my fingers.
The season’s back to spring.
“What was I thinking? I guess I wasn’t.”
“it’s better not to think?”
“Ye…”
I wanted to say, yeah, but I shook my head, because I didn’t think that was the case. I didn’t do that, that there was a goal at the very end, a target there, for me to be motivated. A person can only improve when the heart yearns to be faster. I slapped my cheeks hard to pull myself together, and felt completely awake immediately. Haruto looked up at me in shock, and I smiled, “Right, I’ll take back what I just said. What do you like to eat? What are you craving for now?”
“Why ask this now? I do like lots of food, but I really want to eat ice cream now.”
“Once you nail that perfect start, I’ll buy some ice cream for you.”
“Really?”

“I don’t lie.”
“Great, we got a deal. Let’s start. Hurry.”
It’s opportunistic of Haruto, who was finally motivated. He looked forward with the most serious eyes till now, and from his sidelong face, I could tell his focus was completely different from before. Ah, it’s fine now. He’ll be able to start running.
“Ready!”
Haruto tensed his body, getting ready to start.
“Run!”
On my mark, he shot out like a bullet. His diminutive body gently sprinted into the embrace of spring.

Finally, I brought Haruto out for ice cream. We went to the convenience store I would visit countless times on the way home after my middle school club activities. Some things have changed, but some haven’t. The mood here was like before, and I felt relieved as I went to the ice cream stand.
“Just choose whatever you like.”
“Hmm…”
Haruto brooded, folding his arms and groaning for five minutes or so.
It’s obvious however that he was looking at the cup ice cream that’s about 100 yen more expensive than the others. He’s probably trying to be kind, even though he didn’t have to worry about how much it is. So I asked,
“Strawberry, match, vanilla, rum and raisin, which one you’ll like?”
“Hmm…strawberry.”
“Got it.”
I spent 300 yen for two cups of ice cream, one strawberry, and one rum and raisin for myself.
“I said to choose whatever you want, but you mind sharing this with today?”
“Eh? But isn’t that expensive?”
“Well, I’m asking you because I want to share. Can I?”
“Of course.”
We paid, and sat at the parking lots, opening the lids. Haruto scooped a small spoonful, and brought it to his mouth, happily calling it delicious. I watched on as I too began to eat.
Haruto then continued to enjoy the ice cream, but at the last two mouthfuls, he stopped. I in turn had a completely empty cup.
“Segawa-san, hear me out. Actually, I’m fine with whatever ice cream, but I’m just happy to be able to eat with someone. My dad left, so my mom’s always busy, often not at home, and I often ate alone. I could take this because I still had friends at school, and we ate together. We could play together until night after school. I just have fun, and I didn’t feel sad. That’s why I’m sad and lonely now, but I feel happy these days with you around, Segawa-san. I even get to have some ice cream. So, thanks."

Haruto said, and slowly brought the last two mouthfuls to his mouth, hiding his embarrassment. He took it to his mouth, cherishing this sweet time, but time would ultimately pass.
“I’m done.”
Haruto said, still looking a little lonely. I wanted to talk to him, ease some of his loneliness. There was a silhouette overlooking us, blocking the sun. I lifted my head to see three boys of similar age to Haruto, who called out a boy’s name,
“Ah,Taiki.”
The tall boy standing in the middle of the trio was Taiki. He’s probably 5cm taller than Haruto, and as the cap on his head was worn really low, it’s hard to tell what expression he was giving, but he looked a little gaudy. The other two behind him were looking the same. Those three looked like they were deliberating over whether they should hide the facts.
“What are you doing here?”
“Practicing. I’ll definitely beat you.”
“That’s impossible now, alright? Just give up.”
“I’m not giving up. I still want to hang out with you guys.”
For some reason, Taiki looked hurt hearing these words. According to what I heard from Haruto, I had assumed if he was being bullied, but it seemed there was some internal issue going on.
So, on whose side shall I stand by? I tried to stand up, but Haruto grabbed my hem, so I sat back next to him. I felt a shiver from the shirt being tugged at.
It seemed this was the moment Taiki noticed me. And he glared at me.
“Who are you?”
“Haruto’s coach, sorta? Say, can’t you guys just hang out together like before?”
“Like hell that’s happening. This one’s different from us.”
“You all don’t look so different.”
“Shut up, you outsider. You don’t know anything.”
Taiki’s attitude towards his classmate Haruto was completely different; he was defiant towards me. It was Haruto who was coaxing him.
“Taiki.”
“Wh-what!?”
“Apologize to Segawa-san. You’re too rude.”
With Haruto glaring at him, Taiki went silent. Something’s not right here, but I didn’t know what it was.
“Damn it!”
Taiki, who was being glared at the entire time, cussed away, and brought his two lackeys away from the convenience store. He didn’t apologize to me; instead, he glared furiously.
The trio then vanished among the crowd. Once they were completely gone, Haruto lowered his cute head, and apologized to me.
"Sorry Segawa-san."

"Why are you apologizing, Haruto? You didn't do anything bad."
I patted him on the head as encouragement, since he was so dejected. It seemed to cause a tickle.
"Anyway, that kid called Taiki isn't very popular with the girls, right? Unlike our Haruto here."
"What do you mean, our Haruto? The girls hate me too, since I'm like this, and only play with Taiki and the others."
"I don't find anything weird about this. You enjoy being with them, right? Isn't that good enough?"
"Well, I think so, but the girls and the teachers say it's weird. Ahh, you don't have to show such a face. I just need to win, and then I can play with them. Don't worry. More importantly, you're popular with the girls, aren't you, Segawa-san?"
"Well, not exactly."
To be honest, up till this point, there's only one girl who liked me. No, probably two.
There's the classmate who confessed to me, and another who didn't say anything, didn't identify herself, and just delivered chocolates into my postbox. These two memories were full of the presence of spring, and all that I had.
"Oh, I see."
"Hey, why are you so happy?"
"I'm not."
Haruto grinned, and stood up with much vigor again, stretching again. The sunset shone upon his little body, causing him to dazzle.
"Hey, Segawa-san. If I win, please give me a reward. I'll be able to have a perfect start, just like today."
"Okay. As long as it's within my capability."
"Really? It's a promise then. You break it, and you're a liar."
"Don't worry. Didn't I say I won't break a promise?"
So we promised using our pinkies. As we did so, we shouted like little kids.
Twisty twist, if we break it,
It seemed the pinky touching mine was a little hot.

The day of the showdown was pretty warm.
Right when I could see the elementary school I graduated from, my smartphone vibrated. I frisked my phone out, and it showed my good friend's name. I looked up at the sakura that had already bloomed before I knew it, and stopped in my tracks.
"Yo, you free now?"

"For a moment, yeah. I got a contest coming up."
Ahhh, it seemed Takuma understood immediately as he muttered, it's about the kid you talked about.
"I don't think I can disturb you for long then. I'll keep it brief. I'm returning to Tojyo, and I'm going to talk it out with Mako."
"So you made up your mind?"
A bunch of elementary school kids came running, brushing me by. They sounded really happy, and it would be great if Haruto could join them.
"Not exactly. Yep, I decided where I'm going, just lacking the determination. I'll just sit down and talk it out with her; hope that she'll understand."
"Understand what? That you won't regret it?"
"No, I can't guarantee that I won't regret it. Either way, I can't be certain of the future no matter what my choice is."
"Say, are you really listening to me? Hotta-san didn't want you to regret…"
"That's why I want her to understand. I may regret it, but I hope for her to be with me. I just feel that as long as I'm with her, I'll be able to keep working hard."
"...Why does it sound like you're proposing to her?"
"Too early?"
"What, you intend too?"
"I think it's more like a practice before I propose."
"That sounds better."
Ahh, I guess it's fine to bless him a little on this comfy spring day.
It's the perfect day to move forward.
"Ah but if you fail, we're going drinking. I asked Akane out."
"Of course. You guys will treat me, right?"
"That's a different matter altogether."
"Tch, that's petty."
We laughed. Takuma might have been feeling uneasy, since he notified me that he was returning to Tokyo, and I took the opportunity to nudge him on. After this brief conversation, he hung up, and the black screen was his answer. I gripped the phone hard, and walked on. Like Takuma, I didn't know where exactly I was going, but I decided to move on.
In any case, to the elementary school grounds. I took a firm step forward, all to encourage the kid who had been training hard on sprinting.

I slipped into the elementary school through the back door. The gym and the playground had changed in appearance, but what was left remained nostalgic. The bar that seemed so tall in the past could be reached without stretching. The black bar was a little hot, and I reeled my fingers back in. Haruto saw me, and heaved a sigh of relief. Instead, it was Taiki and the others glaring at me.
"Why are you here?"
"I asked him to."
"But he's an outsider."

Haruto approached me, and tugged at the hem of my shirt like usual. Taiki's glare intensified once he saw that.
"I hate you."
So I grinned back, responding,
"Now that's a coincidence, I don't like you at all but it seems Haruto wants to play with you lot. So then, please keep to the promise."
I lowered my head at them as I said so. It seemed I was an adult to Taiki and the others, so my action was a little surprising. "We-well, unless I win."
It seemed I got him to honor the promise. My presence at this place finally had meaning.
I nudged Haruto in the back while the latter was looking up at me worriedly. Haruto's really light, and stumbled a few steps forward, and that silhouette, having received some encouragement, stood at the starting line without looking back.
I stood at the finishing line along with Taiki's two lackeys. They're short, and looked even smaller from here. Do your best, Haruto, so I muttered in my heart.
The two got to the starting line, and positioned themselves to run.
"Ready~"
The boy next to me shouted. Despite the distance from them, I could sense their tension reaching me.
"Start!"
Both of them sprinted in unison. Haruto's start was perfect; as practised, Haruto didn't lift the upper body immediately, only lifting it once he sped up. But his expression showed him crumbling. He saw Taiki before him, and though they ran at the same time, Taiki's acceleration was faster.
The minor difference was about 50cm wide, the distance Haruto had to reach out and cover.
But Haruto didn't give up. He's about to cry, and was suffering, but he gritted his teeth and continued running. He waved his arms, stretching his leg forward, trying his best to catch up to Taiki. Despite that, the gap didn't shrink, and it caused despair to appear on Haruto's face.
Despair truly has its own weight.
It causes people to feel heavy and unbearable, an increased urge to lower the head further.
Haruto's eyes were looking further down.
Ahh, no.
He couldn't do this.
The only way he's going to run was by looking forward.
The only way he's going to reach was by looking forward.
I knew that very well.
Was there no other way?
What could I, who had experienced that summer, do for Haruto?
At this moment, there was a chilly gust of winter air.
That breeze had me taking a step forward, nudging me forward.

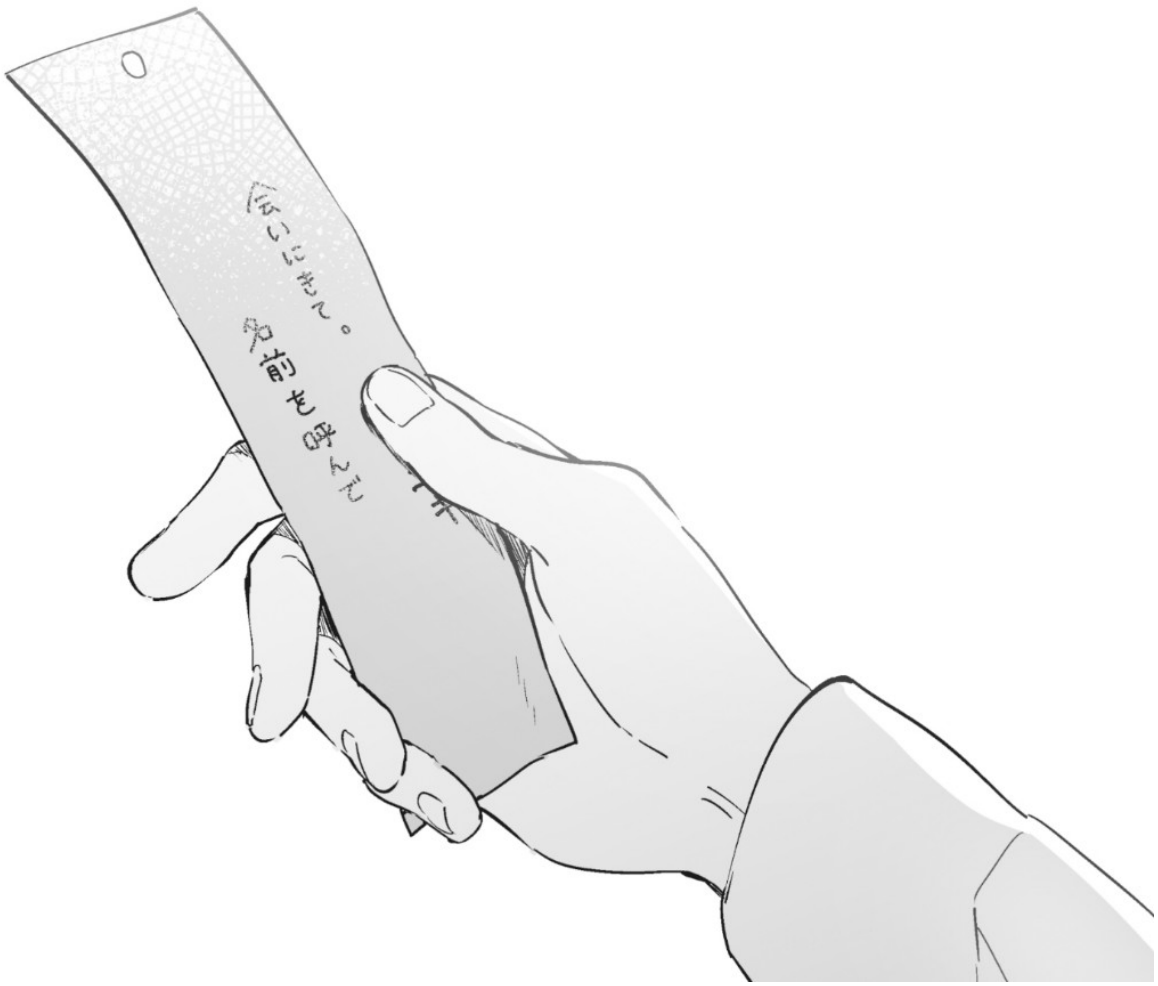
Akane said that I just needed to voice out, to cheer him on.
I took a step forward.
Before I knew it, I was standing behind the finishing line.
I took a deep breath, and inhaled hard, causing my expanded lungs to hurt.
I poured all my emotions in, and yelled towards the boy who was working hard alone.
For I wanted to tell him that he was not alone,
"HARUTOOOO!! LIFT UP YOUR HEAD!!!!!"
Haruto noticed me shouting, and lifted his head as told. The bangs pressed down by the wind fluttered up, and once he did, there was nothing blocking his sight, the spring skies and my silhouette appearing in his large eyes.
Haruto then showed a stunned look,
"LOOK FORWARD!!!"
He smiled.
Ah yes.
His smile had me realizing something,
"I'M HERE!!"
That summer, I definitely…
Did show such a face, smiling as I ran towards the future. Even though it felt hollow, I never regretted that moment. I might have grabbed something with that hand of mine.
The hard work I put in might have paid off.
My throat hurt.
I didn't know how long it was since I shouted like this.
My voice would crack, and it was embarrassing.
But I kept yelling.
I opened my arms wide.
"CHARGE AT ME!!"
Haruto sped up. Taiki panicked and tried to speed up, but Haruto was faster, for Haruto was no longer looking at Taiki.
He was looking further beyond.
He took a first step forward, and a faster second step.
And finally, he gathered strength in his feet, leaping forward as I told him to.
"Oof."
I fell backwards due to the massive impact, but I caught Haruto in my clutches, making sure he didn't get hurt. At that moment, I scented upon a weak but distinct scent of spring.
I fell to the ground, and saw a spring day brighter than that summer day.
"Ow."
My back hit the ground, and was aching away. Haruto was sprawled on my stomach, leaning on my chest, cupping my neck with his hands. He widened his eyes, and found us so close, our noses were about to touch.
“Woahhh, sorry!”
Haruto was flushed red, and hastily moved away from me.

“You don’t have to worry about that. More importantly…”
“Eh?”
“Congrats.”
“Eh? Eh?”
Haruto continued to blush, looking left and right, the thoughts unable to catch up to reality, so I kindly informed him,
“You win.”
This is the place we worked hard to arrive at.
Where no person would remain alone.

Epilogue: Life Goes On

Epilogue

Life goes on



Encounters and farewells happen over and over again, yet we continue to head towards tomorrow.
And at the same time, we pray that someday, somewhere, we will meet that unfamiliar yet nostalgic smile again.
❀

We met at the same old park.
After the race ended yesterday, Haruto told me to meet at a certain time, but I arrived a little earlier.
It is a clear spring, white clouds floating in the blue skies.
The spring sun engulfs the world gently.
The white flowers were beaming on the branches, their iris redder than before. I read in a few books that the sakura flowers turning pink signified that is was wilting. I was ashamed to say that the moment I reached out to touch it with my fingers, a petal fluttered away.
“Ah, Segawa-san, you’re early. Did I keep you waiting?”
“Ah, it’s fine. Eh?”
I heard the voice I was completely familiar with, and looked over to find a girl I had never met before.
She was not wearing a shirt, the long bangs were tied up by a clip. Most surprisingly was the fact that she was wearing a dress. I remembered her voice, and her face seemed familiar on a closer look. Typically, I would have asked for her name. But what I said was,
“You tied your bangs.”
“Nn. I think I can lift my head and walk without covering the front. That’s why I came to see you like this, Segawa-san, this is the real me (boku), no, me (watashi).”
Haruto was a little tentative, giving a bashful smile.
At that moment, many things clicked within me.
Haruto once said, “I guess it started a year ago. My good friends just stopped playing with me out of a sudden. I know why, but I can’t solve this. I really want to play with them, so I tried imitating them, but it didn’t work.”
Whenever Haruto and I were together, Taiki would scowl.
“This one’s different from us.”
“Shut up, you outsider. You don’t know anything.”
I chuckled. Seriously? That’s how it is?
“Ehhh, what? A-am I weird?”
“Ah, sorry, that’s not it. You aren’t weird at all.”
Haruto and I did not know, and now, Haruto’s the only one who did not know Yeah. I was an outsider, and I knew nothing. It’s cruel, but it’s reasonable why Taiki would be glaring at me. He must have liked the girl Haruto, and that’s why they couldn’t remain as friends.

“Right, mind apologizing to Taiki for me? Just say sorry.”
“Wh-what do you mean?”
“He’ll understand once you tell him.”
“Really?”
Haruto tilted her head in confusion.
The fluffy hair gently grazed her white cheek.
“Nn. Let’s finish what we set out to do quickly. What do you want me to do, Haruto?”
Haruto won her contest.
So now I have to fulfill my side of the bargain.
“Ah, that? Actually, erm,”
“Hm?”
“Hm…this is for you. I’ve written my wish.”
Haruto fidgeted, handing over a pink paper. I received it, and had a look. It looked like a bookmark, but there was a line of words on the back,
“Come look for me. Call my name."
There were cute, round, girlish words.
Just as its color would imply, the pink ‘wish’ gave a faint sakura smell. I guess it’s no bookmark, but a magpie bridge for Vega and Altair to meet and cross the heavenly river together.
“Please be my friend, Segawa-san. I guess you’ll be returning to college soon, so just visit from time to time. I want you to meet me, to call my name, to play with me.”
She was giving the yearning look of an abandoned pup, so naturally, my response is,
“Oww…my heart hurts.”
“Eh-ehhh!!?”
“I thought we’re already friends. I must be thinking too much.”
“Eh, no-not at all…”
Saying that, Haruto looked at my face , and realized she was being teased when she saw me grinning.
“Nn…Segawa-san, you meanie.”
So I apologized to the fuming Haruto.
“Sorry. Right, what are we doing today? Anywhere you want to go to?”
“Yes yes. I want to see some flowers. Can they come along too? Taiki, no, Tai-chan?”
“Sure. Let’s go.”
Haruto’s feet quickly ran off, and the scattered sakura petals on the floor danced as she ran along, giving a layer of pink. I was about to call for her, but I noticed something on the pink ‘wish’ of hers. There was a name written at a corner, not Ha-Ru-To that would be expected, but two words.
Speaking of which…
“Haruto, your name is—”
Haruto turned around, spreading her arms wide and outstretched as she tried to embrace everything on this world into her little clutches. Yes, if she

did try to run forth and arrive somewhere, we would have met certain things, which were being collected by us at this point.
“Nn. Haruto’s actually my family name. My actual name is—”
The word that came out were the katakana written on the wish.
What she wrote next in the air was a kanji any elementary kid could recognize.

“Yuki (Fate/Happy).”

It was so simple that one would have difficulty realizing, yet it was within grasp.
And we reached our hand out, finally grasping the thing at the place we finally arrived at.
“…Nice name.”
“Really?”
“So that’s why you have the sakura perfume on.”
Just yesterday, I scented upon a sweet sakura presence when I embraced her. It’s the same on this day; there’s a faint floral fragrance from her body.
“That’s because you’ve been smelling me.”
“I’m not doing that again.”
I’m not going to do that, especially after knowing that Haruto’s a girl. It doesn’t seem like she believes me though.
“Not exactly.. And it’s weird for you to say ‘that’s why’. The smell has nothing to do with my name.”
“No, it matters. Because…”
—For me, this floral fragrance is…
I clammed up. Whatever, I should just keep mum about this. This is a secret only I know, one the world once kept. Haruto gave me a confused look, wondering why I was suddenly silent.
“Why?”
“It’s nothing.”
“I see.”
The sakura petals fluttered in the sky.
And fell like rain.
“Hey, Segawa-san, thanks for looking out for me.”
The words went along with the breeze carrying the dancing petals, landing by my side. It fell deep into the human abyss called ‘me’, faintly melting away, becoming part of me.
I realized this was the line I was seeking since years ago.
So I began to think about these things. I guess being a teacher’s fine too, since it’ll be great to spend time with lonely kids like Haruto. I don’t want lonely people to remain alone.
My mind's starting to grasp what the necessity to that objective was.
“Hey~ Segawa-san, hurry~”

Haruto bashfully called my name, prompting me forth, so I began to move forth.
“I’m going over now.”
And then, I yelled her name.
After so long, the two wishes on the pink slip were in my right hand.

I recalled a certain event in the long past spring. There was a sakura petal that fluttered from my palm, flying to a place I could not reach.
But this is different. I grabbed it firmly in my hand, so that I would not lose it, so that it would not be taken by the wind.
And thus, this will never vanish.
It will remain forever in my heart (here).

A certain person is harboring ‘wishes’, and now, I have conveyed the ‘hope’ that will last until a certain day, along with a reading of the word ‘happiness’. So, so then…
“Come meet me.”
Someone is praying.
Yes, I will meet you. Definitely.
“Call my name.”
Someone is yelling.
And then, I will call your name.
Spring. It is a season of farewells and encounters.
Henceforth we shall experience many encounters, and ultimately reach a certain person.
At that moment, I will surely smile to that person I am unacquainted with—

—Hello(Nice to meet you).

No. I will be saying this countless times, so this is what I shall say—

“Hello, Hello and Hello(I like you).”

I firmly believe that for every first encounter that is filled with lots and lots of emotions—
The smell of ‘Yuki’ will slowly fill my world once again.
And I firmly believed I had taken a firm step towards that future.

Fin.
❀❄

“Hey—”

Afterword

That night, February 13th, the two of them harbored the same wish. However, it fell from Haruyoshi's hand. He wanted to meet her again, he wanted to call for her name again—and so I brought this fragment of the heart to him.
Hello, or to some, nice to meet you.
This volume is a side volume meant to complement Hazuki's debut work, the main story of 'Hello, Hello and Hello'. I guess the readers might have been surprised, and actually, I never expected this work to have a second volume. When I first met the editor-in-charge, he asked if a continuation can be written. So I answered him, this story ends in the first volume. Well, the first volume ended, but I had a lot of elements I never got to write in the main story, so he suggested, why not write a few short stories on the Dengeki Bunko magazine…
So this naïve me really enjoyed the new encounter with them after a year's absence. Before I realized it, I had penned three chapters onto the Dengeki Bunko magazine, and with the additional two chapters, this current volume is formed.
This volume narrates Yuki's memories with her family, Haruyoshi's school life, the constellation that was mentioned in the main story, their trip to the ocean in winter, the star of gladness, Hokulea , and the love story of the other heroine—Akane.
And also, there's the part of what happened to everyone 'till this point', and 'thereafter'.
To be honest, I was worried if I was overdoing it, but now I can proudly say this,
This is an important volume, for him and for her.
The main story is one of 'encounter' and farewell'.
The side stories are those of 'wishes' and 'hope'.
It will be my honor if you, the reader can enjoy this volume.
Also, there is going to be a manga serialization of 'Hello, Hello and Hello'! As a reader, I'm really looking forward to seeing their story penned by Teruya-san.
It is time for the thanksgivings.
First, for Boota-san, who livened this story with outstanding illustrations once again. The desire to see more of these illustrations of those two by Boota-san was the reason why I wrote this volume. Another to thank is the

editor-in-charge Funatsu-san, who is willing to listen to my selfish pleas.
Next, the designer Kamabe-san, along with the individuals who contributed to this volume as well.
Of course, my utmost thanks is to be given to you, the reader, for picking up this volume. Thank you for reading this volume. I look forward to meeting you again in the next story. Right now, I am working hard on the next work.
Now that we are at the last moment, I shall discuss about some inside matters, or rather, my personal explanation.
Or perhaps I might say this is about the ‘wishes’ and ‘hopes’ I have added in the story, to be narrated to you.
‘Hello, Hello and Hello’ is a story about an ordinary, commonplace boy, saving the heart of a girl. It is also the story of a girl noticing the beauty of the world once again.
So he could not do anything about her predicament. She accepted her predicament reluctantly. Despite that, I firmly believe that another form of redemption to her does exist, born by a certain person (you) reading this story of an encounter.
For example, she was nowhere to be seen in Contact 214+1.
This is a story of spring. Winter leaves, spring arrives, the snow melts away, nary to be seen. The characters in this story do not know that the snow had piled up there.
But the readers who have read the story can see it. Have they not seen a smiling girl crying out loud into the wide open arms of a boy?
If this truly is the case—
This love may not exist anywhere in this world, and the girl may continue to be alone,
But at another side of the story he created, surely she met that person, who like her had broken free from the rules of the world, and yet is interrelated to the world. 'An inexplicable person (you) who for some reason knew about her'. I feel I can say that she is no longer alone.
That person had completely recorded all of her hard work, anguish, despair, joy, and the wish she clenched so firmly in her fist, all within the heart.
So when you look up at the summer starry night, prepare for the culture festivals in autumn, look towards the winter oceans, and sprint towards the spring sun.
Please yell out the name only you know of. When she smiles so happily, do embrace her demure shoulders firmly within your clutches, and praise her for working hard.
And also, please say, nice to meet you. Ahhh, but this duty belongs to the boy who did not know her, but had truly spent time with her.
When did that happen? How did it happen? To be honest, we do not know if it truly existed.
Next to be described is something in the further future.

So, after the 'end' of this story, a certain person (you) will continue with his life, only to observe someone in the miracle happening within both spring and snow, calling for a certain person (important person).
Surely that will be proof of the two of them walking down the road to 'the world's happiest love story'. Also, there is something else to prove that this miracle exists. If Haruyoshi's (Yu) hand has hope (ki), then 'Yuki' will always be in his heart. All that is left is to pray—for Haru, Yuki, me and you, that we will be able to reach the bright tomorrow.
In this prayer, I shall follow up with the words in his heart at the very end of the story.

This is the place we worked hard to arrive at.
At nowhere will any of us be alone.

June 2018, tadily thinking about the clear stars beyond the thick clouds, Aya Hazuki

Credits

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